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WEDDING ON DEMAND



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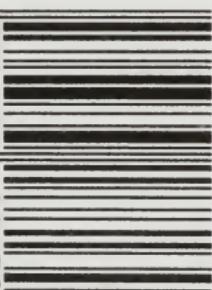
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“Have you decided when you’d like the wedding to take place?” Jessica asked.

“Tomorrow,” Luke replied.

“Tomorrow? No! No, I can’t possibly get married that soon.” When he didn’t answer, she rushed on. “I’ll need to talk to Stacy to explain what’s happening.”

“Children of that age are very adaptable. She’ll take it in her stride.”

“And there’s the flat... The rent’s paid until the end of December.”

“I don’t see that as a problem.”

Clutching at straws, she protested, “But surely it isn’t possible to be married at such short notice?”

“I already have a valid license and all the arrangements have been made.”

“No.” She spoke desperately. “You’ll have to cancel it. I can’t be rushed like this. I need more time.”

“To do what? Disappear again?”

LEE WILKINSON lives with her husband in a three-hundred-year-old stone cottage in an English village, which most winters gets cut off by snow. They both enjoy traveling and recently, joining forces with their daughter and son-in-law, spent a year going around the world 'on a shoestring' while their son looked after Kelly, their much-loved German shepherd dog. Her hobbies are reading and gardening and holding impromptu barbecues for her long-suffering family and friends.

Lee Wilkinson

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ISBN 0-373-18813-7

WEDDING ON DEMAND

First North American Publication 2003.

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Printed in U.S.A.

CHAPTER ONE

SOME time in the small hours of that early October morning, when the sky was dark and cloudy and a grey mist hung over the heath, Jessica Fenton, asleep in her Hampstead flat, was dreaming of Luke.

For more than four years she had tried not to think of him. But though she could usually keep thoughts of him at bay during her waking hours he still, all too often, haunted her dreams, forcing her to relive the past. Both the good times and the bad. The ecstatic moments they had shared, the tender loving and the all-consuming passion when she had been certain he was the only man for her.

Then the pain and bitter disillusionment when she had discovered how he had used, and betrayed, both her father and herself.

This time it was bad as, tossing and turning in bed, she relived their last harrowing meeting.

At the time she had mistakenly believed it had all been over between them, that their impassioned and flawed relationship had been at an end, and that she would never have to see him again.

She had left her father's house in Regent's Park and disappeared without a word. But somehow Luke had traced her to the Bayswater Road, and the cramped and dingy bedsit she had managed to rent...

Jessica had been home from work for only a few minutes when there was a knock at the door. Knowing it was probably the girl next door, wanting change for the electricity meter, she went to answer.

To her horror, Luke was standing there, tall and dark and stern-faced. Panic-stricken, she tried to slam the door, but he put a foot in the gap to stop it closing.

'Let me in, Jess.'

Knowing there was no help for it, she stepped back, and a moment later he was inside, the door closed firmly behind him.

'What are you doing here?' she demanded unsteadily.
'Why have you come?'

'You know why I've come.'

When she said nothing, his silvery-grey eyes watching her closely, he added, 'Susan told me.'

'Told you what?'

'That you were pregnant.'

Jessica's heart-shaped face lost every trace of colour. Why had Susan told him about the baby? she wondered despairingly. *Why?* If she hadn't, he would never have come looking for her...

Pulling herself together, she said jerkily, 'My stepmother had no right to tell you anything, let alone lies.'

'But it's the truth, isn't it? *Isn't it?*' Seeing her lips clamp shut, he insisted, 'Look, Jess, you have to talk to me.'

'I don't have to talk to you. I've absolutely nothing to say.'

Stepping forward, he took her face between his palms, running his fingers into her silky, light brown hair. 'Then listen to me—'

Jerking free, she informed him coldly, 'I don't want to listen to you. I want you to go.'

'Jess, you can't ruin both our lives like this. I want you to marry me, so I can take care of you and our baby.'

'Marry you?' she cried incredulously. 'I hate you! After what you've done I wouldn't marry you to save my life.'

His strong jaw tightened. 'The baby's mine, and I want it.'

Yes, he would.

She remembered how once, lying contentedly in each other's arms after making love, they had discussed their future and agreed that they both wanted children.

But this child he couldn't have.

'There is no baby,' she told him.

'Don't lie to me. I know you're pregnant.'

'There is no baby,' she repeated desperately.

Sounding badly shaken, he said, 'You mean...? Jess, oh, Jess, how *could* you?"

'How could you make love to my father's wife behind his back? Behind *my* back?"

'You've got it all wrong—'

'You were holding her in your arms.'

'No matter what it may have looked like, it was perfectly innocent. I've never made love to Susan.'

'Then what was she doing in your bedroom late at night?"

'She needed to talk to me—'

Recalling only too clearly how she had found him cradling Susan to him, she spat, 'Do you take me for a simpleton?"

'If you'd only listen with an open mind, instead of jumping to conclusions and believing the worst—'

'What else can I believe? Right from the start no one could have missed the way she looked at you. Though you were supposed to be simply "old friends", it was obvious that she fancied you something rotten. I just never dreamt you wouldn't be able to keep your hands off another man's wife, a woman nearly ten years older than yourself.'

'I've told you, I never touched her,' Luke broke in curtly. 'At least not in a sexual way.'

Ignoring his interruption, Jessica went over the same ground she'd been over in her own mind a dozen times before. 'After being alone all those years, I can't understand

why Dad was tempted to marry again, and to a woman so much younger than himself...'

'Perhaps it was because he *had* been alone for so long. Maybe he needed a little joy in his life.'

'Well, he didn't get much joy married to someone like that.' Jessica's green-gold eyes held contempt. 'Almost before the honeymoon was over, his new wife was leaving him at home while she went out, enjoying herself.'

'Look, I'm not trying to make excuses for Susan,' Luke began, 'but your father was—'

'Don't you *dare* try to tell me what my father was,' she burst out furiously. 'He was good and kind and trusting, a better man than you'll ever be, and you cheated him, robbed him of both his wife and his business. Doyles Bank had been his life—'

Her voice broke and she stopped speaking abruptly.

'I neither cheated nor robbed him,' Luke denied quietly. 'I tried to do what was best for him and for everyone at Doyles.'

'How can you stand there and say that?' she burst out. 'You're despicable! Only someone utterly despicable would betray a man they were supposed to be helping... Oh, yes, I know *why* you came over, and I know who brought you here. Michael told me the whole truth.'

'And probably a good deal that wasn't the truth.'

'Why should he lie?'

'Because he hates my guts.'

'Can you wonder? As soon as Doyles was safely yours you threw him out. You accused him of being reckless and irresponsible—'

'Believe me, he was both of those.'

'I *don't* believe you.'

'It's a fact. If I hadn't taken over the bank when I did, it would have crashed, and a lot of other people, as well as

your father, would have been completely ruined. Leaving personal considerations aside, I did what was necessary.'

'You helped to kill Dad,' she accused hoarsely.

Luke took her hand. 'I know how fond you were of him, and I know it was tough losing him like that, but you have to believe that my actions didn't contribute to his death. He was—'

She snatched her hand free. 'I don't want to listen to your lies and your self-righteous explanations. You can't justify your actions, so don't bother to try.'

Luke's eyes darkened to charcoal. 'Can *you* justify what you did to our baby?'

Before she could make any answer, he said with dawning certainty, 'No, I don't believe it. You *wanted* children. Even if you hated *me*, you wouldn't have had an abortion.'

'I didn't.'

'Then you lost it?'

'It's called a miscarriage,' she informed him tightly. 'Perhaps all the stress and worry had something to do with it.'

'But you'll be able to have more,' he said urgently. 'We'll be able to have more. I love you, Jess, and I—'

Refusing to listen and unable to bear the pain of his lies, she pulled open the door. Her voice rising hysterically, she cried, 'Either you go, or I will.'

He saw that she was at the end of her tether and, temporarily defeated, turned and walked away.

Closing the door, she leaned against the panels and listened to his retreating footsteps while the tears poured down her cheeks.

Seeing Luke again had proved to be traumatic. Something she never wished to repeat. But even though she had managed to convince him that there was no baby, now that he knew where she was living, how could she be sure he wouldn't come back?

The answer was, she couldn't.

Which meant she was no longer safe here. Tomorrow she would have to pack her few belongings and run yet again...

As though so much emotion had ripped apart the fabric of her dream, Jessica opened her eyes. Her throat was dry and tight, her face wet.

It was very early. Pre-dawn. There was no sound of traffic on the roads and no birds sang on the heath. The flat, too, was silent, not a soul stirring. But afraid to go back to sleep in case the torture recommenced, she stumbled out of bed and headed for the bathroom.

Today was Friday, a busy day at Foster Gilles. There was an analysts' meeting that morning, and she could use the quiet time before Stacy awoke to finish off her latest report.

When Jessica reached her City office, though she was fifteen minutes early, the internal phone was already ringing.

Lifting the receiver, she answered briskly, 'Jessica Fenton.'

'I wasn't sure you'd be in.' It was Helen Waring's voice. 'Mr Franklin would like to see you as soon as possible.'

'Will you tell him I'll be there in just a moment?'

She hung up her short coat, checked that her smooth coil of light brown hair was tidy, put her briefcase on the desk and her shoulder-bag in a drawer, then made her way to the holy of holies.

In the outer office, Helen glanced up to give her a smile and say, 'You'll be pleased to know he's in a good mood.'

'Come in, Jessica,' a dry, precise voice called in response to her knock.

When she obeyed, Stamford Franklin, a tall, spare man

with a pale, narrow face and thinning silver hair, rose to his feet with outdated courtesy.

The chairman of the board of Foster Gilles was something of an anachronism. Predictable, formal, with stern principles, he was an old-fashioned man in a modern environment. Yet despite his conservative outlook, he had a business acumen which produced results that many of the would-be whizkids envied.

Throughout the firm he was feared and respected.

Jessica liked and respected him.

A devoted husband and patriarch, he was blessed with four married daughters and an abundance of grandchildren, whose silver-framed photographs adorned his imposing desk.

Often uncomfortable with the new breed of professional women, unable to understand or approve of what he saw as their hardness, their unfemininity, he had liked Jessica on sight.

More than pretty, but less than beautiful, graceful and without artifice, she had character and a quiet, self-contained air that pleased him.

He saw her as a young woman he could understand and relate to and, judging that she possessed enough intelligence and foresight to do well in the intricate world of high finance, he had decided to take her under his wing.

His decision had paid off.

Dedicated and hard-working, her path smoothed by her guide and mentor, Jessica's rise in the firm had been phenomenal.

In the three and a bit years she had been with Foster Gilles, her market analyses had been consistently good. She had a flair, a kind of intuition, when it came to predicting how the markets would move, and her forecasts had proved to be some of the most accurate.

As though she were his daughter, Stamford had felt a personal pride in her achievements.

'Good morning, my dear.' He smiled at his young protégée, who looked attractive and businesslike in a navy blue suit and white blouse.

She was tall for a woman, and slim. Too slim in his opinion, but that seemed to be the trend these days, he thought, waving her to a leather armchair opposite his own.

'Good morning, Mr Franklin.' Her answering smile warm, Jessica sat down, crossing her long, slender legs and smoothing her skirt over her knees.

A modest, womanly action, Stamford thought approvingly, before going on to explain why he had sent for her.

'I have some good news for you. Yesterday I was approached by Leroy International, who expressed interest in doing business with us. As you may know, Leroy is an American concern based in New York, but they already have a considerable presence in the Far East, on the Continent and, to a lesser degree, in London itself. They are recognized as a strong, forward-moving company, and next year they intend to expand their operations, particularly in the UK.'

'To launch the project they are holding a special one-day seminar, when their Chief Executive Officer will put forward various options and outline their future plans. Though it is extremely short notice, they would like someone from Foster Gilles to attend.'

'I've decided to send *you* for two reasons. I think it's time you had a chance to spread your wings, and they seem biased towards a female.'

'Now, I don't need to tell you how important this first step is. If Leroy *does* decide to do business with us, it would make them one of our biggest clients.'

Her normally pale face flushed with pleasure and excite-

ment, Jessica asked, 'Where and when is the seminar to be held?'

'New York, tomorrow...'

New York. Though it was a place she'd once dreamt of visiting, Jessica disliked having to be so far away from home, and some of her pleasure faded.

'As I said, it's very short notice. You'll need to fly out first thing in the morning. After the seminar, Leroy is planning some further meetings with one of their top executives. These meetings will help you to evaluate your first impressions and give you a chance to ask any further questions you may have.'

'Hopefully you'll be away no longer than three or four days.'

'Three or four days?' She could scarcely hide her dismay.

Stamford frowned. 'Is there a problem? I understood you had no ties?'

Jessica felt a hot surge of guilt. At her first interview, pre-warned by Helen Waring that to mention Stacy meant no chance of getting the job, she had lied to him, and then been forced to keep on lying.

'No, there's no problem.' She thought with gratitude of Alice. 'It's just a bit sudden, and I'm...' The words tailed off.

'Feeling a little out of your depth? Don't worry, my dear, I have every confidence in you. Miss Waring will arrange your flight and give you all the details. When that's done, if you have nothing particularly urgent to attend to, I suggest that after this morning's meeting you take the rest of the day off. Give yourself time to get ready...'

'Thank you,' she said gratefully.

He rose to his feet—a sign of dismissal—and smiled benignly. 'I look forward to reading your assessment.'

By one o'clock, without stopping to eat lunch, Jessica was on her way home. With several days of separation looming up, she couldn't miss the chance to spend as much time as possible with her three-and-a-half-year-old daughter.

When she reached the flat, however, it was empty. She could have kicked herself. If only she'd thought to phone and say she was coming home early, but she hadn't, and now it was too late.

Alice must have taken Stacy swimming, or to Tumble Tots, or one of the various activities that filled the week with fun. Fun that Alice, a middle-aged widow, seemed to enjoy as much as Stacy did.

Renting a decent place to bring up her daughter, and paying a nanny, took most of Jessica's salary. But a full-time nanny was a necessity. One that she could trust implicitly, and whom Stacy adored, was an absolute godsend.

After her previous nanny—a coolly efficient young woman she had been unable to find fault with, but had never really *liked*—had left her in the lurch two months ago, she had been desperate.

When Alice, warm and motherly, and with excellent references, had answered her hasty advertisement, she could have wept for joy.

Born in the north of England, Alice had gone to the States to be a nanny, and had ended up marrying an American. She had lived in New York for almost twenty years, and with no children of her own had spent those years taking care of other people's.

After her husband's death, feeling more and more homesick for the land of her birth, she had decided to return to the UK.

Having no place of her own, a live-in position had been ideal, and the two women had got on well from the start. Alice, pragmatic and anything but nosy, had asked no ques-

tions, simply accepting Jessica's story that Stacy's father had left them.

Sooner or later, when Stacy herself began to question the absence of a daddy, Jessica would tell her the same.

Not without a feeling of guilt.

Refusing to be banished, guilt lived with her as closely and intimately as an old friend. How often did she wake in the night and worry because she'd robbed Stacy of a father who would have loved her? Robbed Luke of a daughter who, with her dark hair and grey eyes, her little air of assurance, was uncannily like him.

Then she would harden her heart and remind herself of Luke's treachery—only to wonder uncomfortably if she had denied him access to his child to punish him.

Partly, maybe, an inbuilt honesty made her admit, but mostly because of her own need to steer well clear of him.

If he knew about Stacy, he might demand a father's rights, and even for her daughter's sake she couldn't bear to see him on a regular basis, to allow him entry into her life.

Not that he'd ever totally left it. The memories, which despite all her efforts occasionally engulfed her, were too searing, the dreams, over which she had no control, too persistent.

Sighing, she opened her briefcase, took out the cheese sandwich she'd made and cling-filmed before setting off for the office that morning and went through to the large, airy kitchen to make herself a cup of coffee to drink with it.

It was more than four years since she had last seen Luke. Though she could never forget him, she was starting to get her life back together, to regain her mental balance. All she needed now was for the memories to fade until he and the past no longer mattered.

But she knew that was wishful thinking. Though she

hated him for what he'd done, he still had, and would always have, too strong a hold on her very being.

It had been that way from the start.

She had been at university, and in the process of taking her final exams. Though she had been barely twenty-one and young for her age, and he a mature twenty-seven, they had meshed, struck sparks off one another.

As she stirred her coffee, memory took her back to that first meeting...

The weather being unseasonably cold, Jessica was sitting in front of a blazing fire in the living-room of the family's Regent's Park house, reading through the last of her papers, when the door opened and her father walked in, accompanied by a younger man.

Wearing old jeans and a shirt, her hair fastened into a spiky knot on the top of her head, Jessica suddenly found herself wishing she had been better turned out.

Though the newcomer was conventionally dressed in a shirt and tie and a well-cut business suit, there was an air of leashed sexuality about him that was a wake-up call for the senses.

He was somewhere in his late twenties, she judged, tall and dark and ruggedly attractive, with a tough, hard-boned face that caught and riveted her attention.

Look at that mouth.

Better not. It made butterflies dance in her stomach...

Appearing happier than she'd seen him for a while, William made the introduction. 'Jess, I'd like you to meet Luke Ransome. Luke, my daughter, Jess...'

She put her papers on the coffee-table and, rising to her feet, held out her hand.

He took it in a cool, firm grip, and her heart lurched crazily.

'How do you do?' They spoke simultaneously, and Luke

smiled, a white, slightly crooked smile that made her feel as though she'd left a plane at twenty thousand feet without a parachute.

All thoughts of the man she had been seeing regularly since she was eighteen vanished from her mind. Michael Dawson—her father's protégé at the bank, and the son of his best friend—though handsomer than Luke, and very good company, might no longer have existed.

'Luke is the head of Ransome Enterprises. He's over from the States for a while to study our banking methods,' William told her as, strangely weak at the knees, she resumed her seat. 'He'll be staying with us until he can find a flat to rent.'

Her father's words brought a surge of excitement but, aware that Luke was watching her, she tried hard to look disinterested.

The little gleam of amusement that appeared in his heavily lashed silvery eyes suggested she'd failed.

Embarrassed, she blurted out the first thing that came into her head. 'Aren't banking methods pretty much the same the world over?'

'Pretty much, I guess. But I'm hoping to get the low-down on how an old-established UK merchant bank operates. You see, though I was born in England, I've lived in the States for most of my life.'

William, a nice-looking man with good teeth and a head of thick, grizzled hair, clapped his guest on the shoulder, and said with a heartiness that surprised his daughter, 'Why don't you sit down and make yourself at home?'

Nodding his thanks, Luke dropped into the chair opposite Jessica's.

'Jess, my love,' William went on, 'perhaps you'll be kind enough to act as hostess and organize some pre-dinner drinks, while I see if Susan's home yet. Luke's managed to get to London a week earlier than we'd anticipated so

this will be a pleasant surprise for her. The pair of them are old friends. They met in New York when she was living there with her first husband.'

Jessica's lips had tightened at the mention of her stepmother. In the year since her father had married again, she'd seen a drastic change in him. From a youthful and prepossessing fifty-three, he was starting to look downright old and haggard.

While he evinced nothing but affection for his young American wife, and appeared more than willing to put up with her gallivanting, Jessica was convinced he regretted the hasty 'May to December' marriage.

If he did, he showed no signs of admitting it, and seemed determined to make the best of things. Indeed, he had expressed a wish that 'the two women he loved best in the world' should be friends.

But though Susan had seemed genuinely willing to try, Jessica's disapproval of her stepmother's lifestyle had made that impossible, and the best she could manage, even for her father's sake, was a coolly civil relationship.

William turned to the door. 'Now, while Jess sees about the drinks, I'll ask Mrs Rufford which room Susan intended to put you in, and have your luggage taken up.'

As the latch clicked behind him Jessica, wondering why no one had mentioned they were to have a guest, leaned forward to touch the button on the intercom. 'Mary, will you, please, ask Clayton to bring in the drinks trolley?'

Realizing that Luke's gaze had been drawn to her cleavage, where the top button of her shirt was undone, she felt her colour rise. Resisting the temptation to fasten it, she fiddled with the papers on the table.

'Am I disturbing you?' he asked.

The underlying hint of mockery convincing her it was a *double entendre*, she remained silent.

Eyeing the papers, he added innocently, 'Only you look as if you're working.'

Forcing herself to meet his glance, she told him coolly, 'As it happens, I'm practically finished.'

'Do you know, you have the most fascinating eyes I've ever seen?' he remarked softly. 'Green and gold with a hint of blue, like a sunlit tropical sea... Mermaid's eyes...'

The wind taken completely out of her sails, she was searching for something to say when there was a tap and the butler wheeled in a trolley loaded with bottles and glasses.

'Would you like me to pour, Miss Jessica?'

Knowing he was a devotee of *The Archers*, she glanced at the carriage clock on the mantelshelf and, seeing the time, shook her head. 'No, thank you, Clayton.'

The black-coated figure bowed his head and retreated silently.

Turning to her companion, Jessica queried, 'What would you like?'

He gave her a glinting look. 'You mean to drink? Whisky and water, I think. But perhaps I can do the honours?' He rose to his feet.

Feeling her cheeks grow warm at his teasing, she let him get on with it.

'What will it be?'

'A dry Martini, please.'

'Ice and lemon?'

'Please.'

'You have very good manners.'

His comment making her feel like a schoolgirl on her best behaviour, she asked tartly, 'Does that bother you?'

'Not in the slightest. I find it very commendable and charming, especially the way you're so polite to the servants.'

Suspecting mockery, she demanded, 'Why shouldn't I

be? I've known Clayton all my life. I used to climb on his knee when I was a small child.'

'How very egalitarian.'

Sure now that he was making fun of her, she informed him shortly, 'I was brought up to believe everyone was equal.'

'As I share the same view, I can hardly quarrel with that,' Luke agreed mildly.

When he had mixed and poured the cocktail, he handed it to her. His long, lean fingers brushed hers—deliberately, she judged—and sent an electric tingle up her arm.

Purposely, she omitted to thank him, and saw by the gleam in his eye that he'd noticed.

Without comment, however, he helped himself to a small amount of whisky and water and resumed his seat.

Needing something to say, she asked, 'How long do you expect to be in England?'

'I'm not sure. As long as it takes, I guess. I hope you don't mind me staying here temporarily?'

'Not at all. In any case, it isn't my house. As soon as the finals are over and I'm working, I intend to find a flat of my own.'

'I'm rather surprised you're still living at home.'

Sensing criticism, she said, 'I'm still here because that's how Dad wanted it. After he remarried I would have preferred to have gone into student accommodation.'

'Because you don't get on with Susan?'

'What makes you think that?'

'I was watching your face when her name was mentioned. You looked as if you disliked and disapproved of her.'

His honesty sliced through her like a blade.

Unwilling to pretend to a fondness she didn't feel, Jessica answered his charge with a question. 'You know her—do you think she's a suitable wife for my father?'

'Perhaps he wasn't looking for *suitable*. How long is it since your mother died?'

Thrown by Luke's sudden change of direction, she answered, 'Twelve years, and in all that time he never so much as went out with another woman.'

'So for twelve years you had your father all to yourself. It must have been quite a shock when he met a visiting American widow, a young and beautiful one at that, and married her inside a month.'

Stiffly, she said, 'You sound as if you think it's nothing but jealousy on my part.'

'Isn't it?'

'No, it isn't!' But even as she denied it, honesty made her wonder if there might not be a touch of latent jealousy present.

Pushing aside that uncomfortable thought, she went on, 'I love my father very much, and I can't bear to see him waiting for her to come home night after night—' Realizing she'd said too much, Jessica stopped speaking abruptly.

'Surely that's up to him?' Luke observed calmly, 'If *he* doesn't mind, what business is it of yours?'

'Would you stand for it if it was *your* wife?'

'No.' His voice even, he added, 'But circumstances alter cases.'

'Don't sound so damned smug and banal,' she flared.

'Ah, so you do have claws.'

'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that.'

'Why not? I guess I deserved it.'

'I shouldn't have spoken that way to a guest in my father's house.'

'Being a guest cuts both ways. I should have kept my opinions to myself.'

Then, with a complete change of subject, he said, 'I understand that when you leave college you'll be joining Doyles?'

'Yes. Joan Whitaker, my father's PA, is retiring in six weeks' time. I'll be taking her place.'

'Because you *want* to?'

'You mean, was I pressured?'

'Were you?'

'No. I've always wanted to carry on the family tradition. My great-great-grandfather, Joshua Doyle, founded the bank back in the early eighteen hundreds, and there have been Doyles working there ever since.'

'It's housed in a fine old building,' he commented.

A little surprised, she asked, 'You've already been to the bank?'

'Yes. I went straight from the airport and met your father there.'

Sipping his drink meditatively while he stared into the flames, Luke left the ball in her court.

CHAPTER TWO

STILL unhappy about the way she'd lost her temper, and wanting to fill a silence that threatened to grow uncomfortable, Jessica remarked, 'You mentioned you were born in England?'

'Yes,' Luke replied. 'My father was English and my mother American. When I was eleven they were killed in a skiing accident, and I went to live in New York with my maternal grandparents.'

Remembering her own mother, Jessica said, 'Losing both parents must have been very hard.'

'It was for a while. But my grandparents, who were pretty exceptional people, welcomed me with open arms. They understood my grief, and shared it, without giving way to it. At heart they were grass-roots people. Though they had been running a very successful business conglomerate in New York for more than thirty years, they came from pioneering stock, and had met and married when they were living in Alaska. Grandmother, who was very proud of her Russian blood, was called Anastasia. My mother was named after her, and I promised that my first daughter should be, too,' he added with a grin.

Seeing an opening, she was about to ask if he was married when he went on, 'My grandparents were a devoted couple, and their only regret was that they had had only the one child. They'd always hoped to have a larger family. More than anything, Grandfather had wanted a son to follow in his footsteps...'

'And you took the place of that son?'

'That's right.'

'Are they still alive?'

'My grandfather is. Very much alive. Though he's seventy-nine, he still goes into the office each day and works longer hours than most of the people there.'

'With no thoughts of retiring?'

'None, apparently. He might have retired if my grandmother had lived, but now he's got nothing to retire for...'

Just as he finished speaking, the door opened and Susan came hurrying in. Beautifully dressed and made up, her blonde hair expertly styled, she looked both poised and elegant.

By comparison, Jessica felt unkempt and anything but poised.

Her blue eyes alight, Susan cried, 'Luke, darling! How lovely to see you!'

'Susan.' Putting down his glass, he rose to his feet.

Seizing both his hands, she kissed him full on the lips then, sinking onto the settee, pulled him down beside her. 'I've been visiting my sister—you remember Lisa? But if I'd known you were coming today I'd have got home earlier. Now, tell me all the news. What's been happening on the New York scene since I last saw you? It seems so long...'

'If you'll excuse me?' Gathering up her papers, Jessica prepared to depart.

'I've asked for dinner to be served at a quarter to eight,' Susan told her stepdaughter.

'I'm afraid I won't be in for dinner,' Jessica said. 'I have a date.'

It was a lie. But this time the jealousy was far from latent, and she needed to get away.

'I'll say goodnight, then,' Luke drawled.

'Goodnight.'

She met his grey eyes and saw by the glint of amusement in them that he had rightly assessed the situation.

Biting her lip, she hurried to the door and made good her escape.

Over the next week, although they were living under the same roof, Jessica saw nothing of Luke. Despite the fact that she was an early riser, he was up and gone before she came down for breakfast, and she had taken herself off to bed before he returned each evening.

Still held in thrall, she tried to tell herself it was for the best. He was, no doubt, an habitual philanderer, who couldn't help but flirt with any female who crossed his path.

So as far as he was concerned, out of sight probably meant out of mind, and it was unlikely that he would have given a girl he must have seen as a gauche student another thought.

Acknowledging that, she did her utmost to banish his image and regain her freedom. Yet, rather than fade, the fascination she had first felt only increased.

Whenever her mind wasn't focused on her work he took it over effortlessly, filling her waking thoughts and managing to disturb her body and soul simply by existing.

He even haunted her dreams.

While she slept, her subconscious conjured him up and, lying there, she waited eagerly for his kiss, for the touch of his hand, for him to take her in his arms and make love to her.

One morning, lying half asleep and half awake, still tangled in the golden cobwebs of her dreams, it occurred to her that she still didn't know whether or not Luke Ransome was married. Though he didn't wear a ring, her dream lover might well be some other woman's husband, or at least involved in a serious relationship.

Dismayed by the possibility, and hoping to find out the truth, when she and her father were alone at the breakfast table—Susan always had breakfast in bed—Jessica remarked carefully, 'I haven't seen anything of your guest.'

Putting down his financial paper, William told her, 'At the moment Luke's working all hours.'

'Apart from the fact that he lives in New York and is head of Ransome Enterprises—' Jessica strove to sound casual '—what do you know about him?'

'I know he's a decent man, straight as a die and clever, not to say *brilliant*. Though he's only twenty-seven, he's already a multimillionaire in his own right, and one day soon he'll take over his grandfather's company and turn it into something really big.'

Seeing by his daughter's look of disappointment that he hadn't succeeded in answering her question, William asked drily, 'So what do you *want* to know about him?'

'Is he married or anything like that?'

'Not that I'm aware of.'

'Only you mentioned he would be looking for a flat,' she added lamely, 'and I wondered if that was so some woman could join him?'

'Shouldn't think so. As far as I know, he's looking for a bachelor pad. But why all the interest?' Then with a sudden frown he added, 'You surely haven't fallen out with Michael?'

'No, of course not.'

'He hasn't been round lately.'

Trying not to sound defensive, she said, 'Well, we haven't seen each other for a while because I've been so busy studying.'

It was the truth, yet not the whole truth. Since meeting Luke, she hadn't wanted to go out with Michael, and had used the finals as an excuse to keep him away.

Giving her a shrewd glance, William warned, 'Well, try not to shut him out totally. He's almost one of the family and I don't want him to be hurt.'

It was clear where her father's sympathies lay.

* * *

The exams finally over, Jessica was alone in the living-room that evening when Michael phoned to suggest a celebratory dinner.

'What about Denvers? Shall I book a table for, say, eight o'clock?'

Unwilling to accept Michael's invitation while her head was full of thoughts of another man, she asked, 'Would you mind very much if we left it for the moment?' She added, with some degree of truth, 'I'm just getting over a summer cold, and I'm still feeling a bit under the weather.'

It wasn't like Jessica to give way to illness of any kind and, sounding surprised and not a little put out, Michael agreed. 'Of course we can postpone the celebrations, if that's what you want. I'll give you a ring in a day or so. Look after yourself.'

Feeling guilty, she replaced the receiver and turned to the door. At that instant it opened and, to her surprise, Luke walked in.

He had a *presence* that had nothing to do with his height and build, and somehow he did more than just enter a room—he filled it, took it over easily, effortlessly.

Smiling in a way that made her heart start to beat a rapid tattoo against her ribs, he said, 'Hi, there, stranger. Exams all finished?'

'Yes, the final one was today.' She was annoyed with herself for sounding breathless.

'Good. Presumably that leaves you free to concentrate on other things?'

Puzzled by the way he'd phrased the question, she asked, 'Such as?'

'Having dinner with me, for example.'

'Tonight?'

'Unless you already have a date with Dawson?'

'How do you know about Michael?'

'When I told your father I intended to ask you out he—very nicely—warned me off.'

More than a little flustered, she said, 'But you've asked me anyway.'

'I thought you were old enough to make up your own mind. So, do you have a date?'

'No, I don't.'

'Then Dawson hasn't got round to asking you yet?'

Watching the colour rise in her cheeks, Luke said slowly, 'I see... He has, and you turned him down. May I ask why?'

'I didn't feel much like going out,' she said weakly.

'That's a pity. I was hoping it was because of me.'

'Because of you?' she said, failing to understand.

'Didn't you feel the instant attraction, the sexual chemistry between us? The moment I set eyes on you, I felt as if I *recognized* you, as if *you* were what I'd been waiting for. I've had a job to think of anything else. I even dream about making love to you.'

His eyes on her face, he added, 'From your reactions, I rather thought you felt the same way.'

Answering honesty with honesty, Jessica admitted, 'I do. Only I didn't realize... I never thought that you might...'

'Find you utterly enchanting?' He smiled at her. 'Well, I do.'

They were standing quite close together, and she waited eagerly for him to take her in his arms and kiss her.

When he simply stood there and regarded her, she felt a sharp pang of disappointment.

In the same situation, none of her college friends would have thought twice about taking the initiative and kissing him. But even in this age of sexual freedom and equality, Jessica had an inbuilt reserve that prevented her making the first move, a natural modesty that made her wonder whether perhaps he didn't *want* to kiss her...

Reading her thoughts with staggering accuracy, he said softly, 'Oh, yes, I *want* to. But if I started to kiss you, I'm not sure I could stop, and it wouldn't be ethical to take you to bed in your father's house.'

Disappointment gave way to gladness. Rather than being an unscrupulous philanderer, who might just be shooting her a line, his words seemed to prove he was a man of integrity.

'In that case I'll settle for dinner,' she told him boldly.

'Any particular place you'd like to go?'

'I really don't mind, I'll leave it to you.'

'Peregrines?' he suggested. 'Then afterwards we can dance.'

Peregrines, which was fairly new on the West End scene, was smart and exclusive—a haunt of the rich and famous.

'Sounds wonderful! But I heard people were booking months ahead, so I doubt if we'd get a table.'

'We'll get a table.'

Surprised by his certainty, she asked, 'How can you be so sure?'

He grinned. 'As part-owner, I have pull. How long will it take you to get ready?'

'Half an hour?'

'I'll have a taxi here for seven-thirty. Give you a little leeway.'

As they emerged into the hall, she asked, 'Is Dad home yet, do you know?'

'Yes, we came back together. He went straight through to the study.'

'I'd better tell him we're going out.'

The weather had turned warm, and her father was sitting in front of an open window, reading the evening paper. He looked tired, Jessica thought.

Glancing up, he smiled at her. 'The last exam over? How did it go?'

'Quite well, I think.'

'Planning to celebrate tonight?'

'Yes, that's what I came to tell you.'

'Michael said he was going to call you. What time will he be here? We'll all have a drink together before you go. The champagne's already on ice—'

'Michael won't be coming,' she stated flatly. 'It's Luke I'm going out with.'

Watching her father's jaw tighten, she added, 'I'm quite aware you don't approve. Luke told me how you'd warned him off.'

'I suppose you think I shouldn't have tried to interfere?' William said wearily, 'and I dare say I shouldn't...'

He paused, sounding a shade breathless, as he often did these days, before going on, 'But I didn't want to stand by and see the status quo upset for what will almost certainly be just a flash in the pan. After all, Luke will be going back to the States sooner or later.'

Jessica, who didn't enjoy being reminded of that, told him quietly, 'I know how fond you are of Michael, but it's up to me to decide who I want to go out with. After all, we're not engaged or anything.'

'I'm quite aware you two have kept it light, but you must know as well as I do that Michael's only been waiting for you to finish university before he pops the question.'

'Well, until he does, *if* he does, and until I accept, *if* I accept, I don't feel committed.'

William looked harassed. 'But what will you tell him when he rings?'

'As a matter of fact, I'd put him off even before Luke asked me.'

'Well, I just hope you know what you're doing.'

'You said yourself that Luke was a decent man.'

'I've no doubt he is. But for one thing, he's much too old for you.'

'You told me he was twenty-seven. Now you're making him sound like Methuselah.'

'Michael's only twenty-two.'

'So what?'

Sounding exasperated, her father said, 'Michael's a boy who can be trusted. Luke's a mature, sophisticated man, experienced where women are concerned, and—'

'But that doesn't mean he's untrustworthy.'

Taking no notice of the interruption, William continued, 'Don't forget, Susan knows him quite well, and she knows the kind of worldly society women he takes out. Believe me, Jess, he's right out of your league, and I don't want to see you get hurt.'

Jessica went to sit on the arm of her father's chair. 'I know, Dad, and I'm grateful. But I'm not a little girl who needs protecting any longer. I'm a grown woman. I have to be free to play in whatever league I choose and, if necessary, be allowed to make my own mistakes.'

Sighing, William gave in. 'Very well. What time are you intending to go out?'

'Luke said he'd call a taxi for half past seven.'

'Susan should be down any minute, so before you go we'll all get together in the living-room for that glass of champagne.'

'Thanks, Dad.' Putting her arm around his neck, she leaned to kiss his cheek. It seemed to be thinner than she remembered.

Some twenty-five minutes later, carefully made up, her smooth, shoulder-length hair framing her eager face, Jessica descended the stairs.

Remembering how Luke had referred to her eyes as 'mermaid's eyes', she had chosen to wear a chiffon evening dress in sea colours of green and gold and blue. A subtle, romantic dress that Michael had never particularly liked.

Luke was waiting in the hall. Devastatingly attractive in

immaculate evening clothes, he stepped forward and, taking her hand, raised it to his lips. 'You look a million dollars,' he told her softly. 'There won't be a man there who doesn't envy me.'

Yes, sophisticated and experienced...

Trying to hide how her heart was racing, she said lightly, 'Before we go, Dad's laying on champagne.'

'Then he wasn't too worried?'

'I think he was, really,' she admitted honestly. 'You see, he's concerned about Michael.'

'I gather he regards Dawson as family?'

'He's never made any secret of the fact that he'd like him for a son-in-law.'

'Would you like him for a husband?'

'I've known Michael since we were children. I'm very fond of him,' she answered obliquely.

Luke's raised eyebrow remarked on her evasiveness, before he pursued, 'But Dawson isn't the only reason your father's unhappy?'

Flushing a little at his perspicacity, Jessica explained, 'Because, over the years, he's had to be both mother and father to me, he tends to worry.'

His voice dry, Luke suggested, 'And he thinks of me as the big bad wolf?'

'Something like that,' she admitted awkwardly.

'What do you think?'

'I think I'm quite capable of taking care of myself.'

'Is that what you told him?'

'More or less.'

'No wonder he's worried,' Luke commented wryly. 'It must be a shock to find his pet lamb suddenly wants to leave the fold and brave being eaten, after being cosseted and over-protected all these years...'

'That's an arrogant supposition,' she said angrily.

'But on the mark.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'You have an innocent, untouched air that makes it obvious.'

'Really? Where do you suppose that leaves Michael?'

'Getting his fun elsewhere, so he can stay in your father's good books until the wedding ring's safely on your finger... Either that or he's a cold fish with no red blood in his veins.'

'How dare you?' she choked.

'Oh, come on! Though you may be young for your age and innocent, you're no fool. If the pair of you aren't sleeping together—'

'Oh, but we *are*,' she lied gleefully.

Seeing the look of shock that appeared in Luke's silvery eyes, Jessica hugged herself. Serve the arrogant so-and-so right if she'd startled him.

A moment later, doubt creeping in, he queried, 'Really?'

'Really.' Determined to keep the advantage, she added lightly, 'If you've changed your mind about taking me out to dinner, I'll quite understand.'

'Why should I have changed my mind?'

'I thought that knowing Michael and I sleep together might make a difference.'

'Indeed it *does*.' His little smile, hinting at all kinds of things, sent a shiver down her spine.

As she faced the fact that he'd neatly turned the tables and was once more master of the situation, he reminded her, 'Now, what about that champagne?'

Tucking her hand through his arm, he added, 'Can't think of a better way to start the evening.'

Susan and William were sitting on the living-room settee together, holding a low-toned conversation which stopped the moment the door opened.

'Ah, there you are!' William said with false heartiness.

'Jess, my love, you look beautiful. Luke, are you any good at opening champagne?"

'Sure am,' Luke responded cheerfully.

Lifting the bottle of Bollinger from its bed of crushed ice, he stripped off the wire and, easing out the cork with a nicely controlled pop, poured the smoking wine into four champagne flutes.

'Susan...'

'Thank you.' Her smile was bright but forced.

He handed out the other two glasses and, having picked up his own, waited for William to propose a toast.

'To Jess. Success in the exams.'

The other two echoed his words before drinking.

As they all stood and sipped, the silence lengthened, threatening to become awkward.

Jessica and Susan both hurried into speech at the same instant, then stopped abruptly, confounding each other's good intentions.

Though they each did their best to keep up the conversation, there was a general air of relief when Clayton appeared and announced that the taxi had arrived.

'Well, have a good time,' William said, as they replaced their glasses.

'Thanks,' Luke answered. 'We will.'

Peregrines was quietly luxurious, with an understated decor and a wonderful ambience. Every table was filled with the rich and famous; members of the aristocracy were practically ten a penny, and even minor royalty was there.

Jessica, however, was so taken up with the man by her side that it all washed over her like a dream, and though the cuisine was first class, half the time she scarcely knew what she was eating.

The fascination appeared to be mutual.

Luke, too, paid scant attention to either his surroundings

or his meal, scarcely taking his eyes off his companion's glowing face as they talked and smiled and danced together until the early hours of the morning.

It was as though they were the only two people in the world, and if Jessica had started the evening infatuated, she ended it head over heels in love.

She had hoped that in the taxi taking them home, Luke would put an arm around her and hold her close, but he maintained a decorous foot of space between them, merely turning his head from time to time to smile at her.

Still, it was enough to keep her on cloud nine.

After he'd paid off the taxi and added a generous tip, Luke took her key and let them in. His hand beneath her elbow, they climbed the stairs.

When they stopped outside Jessica's bedroom door, her voice husky, she said, 'Thank you... It's been a wonderful evening.'

'I'm pleased you've enjoyed it.'

'Goodnight.' *Surely he would kiss her now?* Lifting her face in mute invitation, she held her breath while she waited.

Instead of kissing her, he took her hand and, lifting it to his lips, said a grave, 'Goodnight, Jess.' A moment later he was gone.

It seemed that he was determined to strictly observe the proprieties while she lived under her father's roof.

Shaken by mingled emotions, of which disappointment was the uppermost, she went in and began to prepare for bed.

While she showered and cleaned her teeth, she thought about the evening. Luke had proved to be an exciting, stimulating companion who, as well as being so irresistible sexually, was surprisingly nice, easy to like.

To Jessica, liking was, in many ways, as important as

loving, and she knew she needed to feel both to make any relationship complete.

She had thought she felt both for Michael. But now she realized that *love* was too strong a word for what was merely affection. There was no fire there, no depth, no excitement, no passion.

Whatever happened between herself and Luke, she knew beyond a shadow of doubt that she could never marry Michael.

She sighed. Breaking it to him was bound to be difficult, nor would it be easy to tell her father, but it was something she had to do as soon as possible.

The following morning, after a few hours of restless sleep, she got to the breakfast table late. Her father was just finishing his coffee.

Glancing up from his paper, he asked with a casualness that wouldn't have fooled a child, 'Enjoy yourself last night?'

'Very much.'

'Food good?'

'Excellent.'

He put away his glasses and began to fold up his paper in preparation for leaving.

Knowing she had to get things over with, she braced herself and said quickly, 'Dad, I have something to tell you that I know you're not going to like...'

Picking up her agitation, he raised his head sharply. She glimpsed the apprehension in his hazel eyes, heard his breathing quicken and guessed the kind of thing he was imagining.

'No, it's nothing like that. Luke behaved like a perfect gentleman...' She almost heard her father's sigh of relief. 'It's just that I've realized I can't marry Michael.'

'Aren't you jumping your fences before you get to

them?' William queried, with an attempt at unconcern. 'He hasn't even asked you yet.'

'Well, I can't just let things drift until he *does* and then say no. I'm very fond of him, but I know now that I don't love him.'

William's thick brows drew together in a frown. 'You surely don't imagine you love Luke Ransome, a man you hardly know?'

Her silence was answer enough.

'Don't be a fool, girl. What you feel is just sexual attraction.'

'Well, whatever it is, it's opened my eyes. It's so much stronger than anything I've ever felt for Michael.'

With sudden violence, William said, 'I wish we'd never invited Ransome here.'

She shook her head. 'Even if I'd never met Luke, sooner or later I would have realized that what I feel for Michael isn't enough to make me want to spend the rest of my life with him.'

After a moment, she added quietly, 'I'm just glad I found out before we drifted into marriage.'

There was a long pause before William said heavily, 'Well, if you're *sure* of your feelings, there's really nothing I can say.'

'I'm truly sorry. I know it must have come as a blow to you.'

'Michael's always been like the son I never had. I'd planned to leave the bank to you and him jointly. Doyles and Dawson...'

'Oh, Dad...' Jessica's eyes filled with tears.

He reached across the table to pat her hand. 'Don't upset yourself. I wouldn't want you to marry a man you don't love just to please me, so I suppose for everyone's sake you'd better break it to him as soon as possible.'

Knowing it was something she couldn't do over the

phone, straight after breakfast Jessica went to the bank and asked to have a private word with Michael.

When she was shown into his office, he rose to his feet, looking surprised. 'Well, hello... I thought you weren't starting your job for another six weeks.'

'I'm not. I came in because I wanted to talk to you.'

His blue eyes a little wary, as if he sensed something was wrong, he asked, 'How are you feeling? You look all right.'

'I am all right.' Guilt whipping the colour into her cheeks, Jessica blurted out, 'What I told you last night wasn't exactly the truth. I just used my cold as an excuse.'

She swallowed hard. 'You see, I've met another man that I'm attracted to and—'

'You mean you told me a pack of lies just so you could go out with another man?'

'No, not exactly...'

'Then you *didn't* go out with him?'

Biting her lip, she admitted, 'Yes, I did... Though when I spoke to you, I had no idea he was going to ask me.'

'If you didn't know he was going to ask you, why did you turn me down?'

'He'd been on my mind a lot, and it didn't seem fair to go out with you when I was thinking of someone else. I'm sorry,' she added miserably.

His fair face turning brick red, Michael said angrily, 'Don't be an idiot, Jess. You must know I want to marry you. You can't throw everything away just because of some passing fancy.'

'But it *isn't* just a passing fancy. I'm in love with him.'

'You may think that now, but—' Sharply, he said, 'Does he feel the same way about you?'

'I don't know,' Jessica confessed. 'But no matter what happens, it's made me realize that though I'm fond of you, I don't love you enough to marry you.'

'But you'd marry *him*?'

'Yes, if he asked me.'

Michael changed ground. 'What about your father? He's made so many plans for the future it'll break his heart if you tell him you—'

'I've already told him. Though he's bitterly disappointed—he thinks of you as a son—he said he wouldn't want me to marry someone I don't love just to please him.'

Looking like a man who'd had his crutch kicked from under him, Michael sat down abruptly.

'I'm more sorry than I can say,' Jessica told him in a low voice. 'I hope we can stay friends.'

She had reached the door when he looked up to ask abruptly, 'Who *is* this man? Do I know him?'

It was the one question she'd been praying he wouldn't ask.

'What does it matter who it is?'

'It matters to me. Who is it, Jess?'

Knowing that if she didn't tell him he'd get it out of her father, she said reluctantly, 'Luke Ransome.'

Michael laughed incredulously. '*Luke Ransome!* You must be out of your mind! From what I've heard, he eats little innocents like you.'

'I don't see how you can have heard any such thing,' she said coldly.

'One day last week I had lunch with your father and Susan, and Ransome's name cropped up. According to Susan, he attracts women like buddleia attracts butterflies. Sophisticated women who know their way around.'

'Believe me, Jess, you can't trust him. He's the love-'em-and-leave-'em sort. What chance do you think you stand of a man like that being serious about you?'

'I don't know, a slim one maybe. But I'm prepared to take it.' Seeing his set face, she ended, 'I'm sorry, Michael. I never wanted to hurt you...'

But as Jessica closed the door behind her it occurred to her that he'd been appreciably more angry than hurt.

He'd never once mentioned the word 'love', and he'd given the impression of a man whose future plans had been messed up, rather than a man whose heart had been broken.

The thought eased her guilt a little as she made her way back home.

CHAPTER THREE

DURING the following week or so, though Luke worked late a lot of evenings, as well as spending time looking for a flat, most days they managed to snatch an hour or two in each other's company.

They found it deeply satisfying. Once in a while saying nothing, easy and content with the silences. At other times talking non-stop, agreeing and disagreeing, putting the world to rights, raging against the injustices of life, laughing at the absurdities. Getting to know one another.

Sometimes they had a walk in the park, followed by a bar meal at a crowded pub; at others they ate a tête-à-tête supper at an exclusive restaurant, or caught a late show.

As far as Jessica was concerned, how they spent their time didn't matter a jot. The important thing was being together.

Neither William nor Susan said a word, but it was abundantly clear from the envious looks Susan gave her step-daughter that she would have been only too pleased to have changed places.

Had she done so, she would have been startled to find how entirely innocent the whole thing was, Jessica thought wryly.

Both in her father's house and out of it, Luke carefully avoiding all but the most casual of contacts.

She might have thought he was uninterested in her as a woman, if from time to time she hadn't seen the little lick of flame that burnt in his eyes when he looked at her.

But while she marvelled at his self-control, she sensed

he was getting impatient, and she wondered how much longer they could go on like this.

The following Friday evening, Luke insisted on taking all four of them to Peregrines for a champagne dinner.

During the course of an excellent meal, he raised his glass to the older couple. 'Here's to Susan and William. I have to thank you both for your very generous hospitality over the past weeks.'

William, having shrewdly summed up the situation between his daughter and his guest and concluded that it was perfectly innocent, had mellowed appreciably. 'We've enjoyed having you,' he said, and sounded as if he meant it.

Susan, to whom he'd confided his conclusions, added warmly, 'We'd be only too delighted if you'd stop looking for a place to live and agree to visit with us for the rest of your stay.'

'Thank you, that's extremely kind of you. But the object of the evening was to tell you I'll be moving out tomorrow. I've found a small service flat which in many ways will be ideal. To start with it's close enough to the bank to enable me to walk to work...'

Jessica listened with mixed feelings, wondering what effect this move would have on their relationship—or, rather, *non-relationship*.

Would Luke take this opportunity to step gracefully out of her life? In spite of what he'd said about the attraction, the sexual chemistry, between them, it might not be *her* he wanted specifically. Maybe any female would do. And once he had a place of his own he would have no difficulty finding a willing lover.

Made wretched by this thought, she spent the rest of the evening sunk in gloom, only keeping a smile pinned to her lips and joining in the conversation with an effort.

On their return home, the older pair said their goodnights and went up to bed, leaving the younger ones alone.

They were having a last coffee in the living-room when Luke remarked casually, 'By the way, I've got theatre tickets for tomorrow evening, if you'd like to go.'

Her spirits lifting, she agreed without hesitation, 'I'd love to.'

Watching him smile, Jessica wondered if she shouldn't play harder to get. But she was incurably honest, and it wasn't in her nature to play games.

'Suppose I pick you up about six-thirty, then we can have a bite to eat first?'

'Sounds wonderful.'

'Do something to please me?'

Anything. 'What?'

'Wear your mermaid dress.'

The following morning, as soon as Luke had packed his belongings and left, the house seemed curiously cold and empty.

Feeling like a lost soul, Jessica spent the endless day trying to keep busy, while she consoled herself with the thought that he would be calling for her that evening.

When his taxi finally arrived, she was almost worn out with waiting. Hurrying to answer the door she greeted him with a breathless, 'Hi!'

'Hi.' Wearing a well-cut dinner jacket and black bowtie, he smiled at her, setting her pulses racing. 'You look delightful.' With no change of tone, he added, 'Missed me?'

Yes hovering on her lips, she changed it to a careful, 'There hasn't been time. Are you coming in?'

He shook his head. 'I think not. We've a table booked for a quarter to seven.'

When she was ensconced in the taxi, she asked, 'How did the move go? All settled in?'

'As settled as I'll ever be.'

'What's your flat like?'

'Small, modern, functional, soulless, comprising a kitchen, living-room, bathroom and one bedroom with a double bed.' He slanted her a glance. 'I'll take you to see it after the show, if you like.'

At last.

Knowing she would be agreeing to something far deeper than a casual look around his flat, she hesitated. If she could just be sure he loved her...

'Luke, I—'

Leaning towards her, he put a finger to her lips. 'There's no need to answer now. Think about it.'

The play was a bitter-sweet comedy about two people who were on the verge of becoming lovers, and Jessica thoroughly enjoyed it.

Outside the theatre, on the crowded pavement, Luke put a hand beneath her elbow and steered her towards a taxi he'd contrived to have waiting by the kerb, and helped her in.

When she was settled he climbed in after her and, without consulting her, leaned forward to give the driver the address. 'Seventeen Alexandra Place, Regent's Park, please.'

Her home address. Jessica sighed. Having seen how uncertain she still was, Luke had made the decision for her.

But was it the right decision?

No matter what *his* feelings were, she loved him. He was the only man in the world for her, and what was the use of life if one was too afraid to live it?

She wanted to be with him, to make love with him, to lie in his arms. If she got hurt, she got hurt. The only way to ensure against getting hurt was to live in a shell and never venture out of it, which was merely existing...

Putting a hand on Luke's dark sleeve, she said, 'I don't want to go straight home. I'd prefer to see your flat.'

He turned to look at her, searching her face in the constantly changing half-light. 'Sure about that?'

'Quite sure,' Jessica said steadily.

Leaning forward, he tapped on the glass panel. 'Driver, can you make that the Thoresby Building, Woolmart Street?'

As they changed direction and headed for the City, her decision made for better or worse, Jessica found herself tongue-tied, for the first time ill at ease in Luke's company.

No doubt his previous lovers would have carried off the situation with panache, she thought gloomily, but, inexperienced and suddenly shy, she had no idea what to do or say.

'Having second thoughts?' he asked softly.

'No.'

'Then what's wrong? Something is, I can tell.'

'I just wish I was more sophisticated,' she burst out, angry with herself.

'My darling idiot, don't you know that your lack of sophistication is one of the things I love about you?'

It was the first time he'd mentioned the word 'love', and though it was by no means a declaration of undying devotion it was enough to make her whole being light up with happiness.

Wanting to hide what she guessed was an only too obvious reaction, she objected wryly, 'Personally I can't think of a less lovable trait. As far as I'm concerned, lack of sophistication translates as naïve and awkward.'

'Not to me, it doesn't,' Luke said firmly. 'In any case that's not the only thing I love about you...'

He gave her a expectant glance, as if waiting for her to ask the obvious question.

Suspecting he was teasing her now, she widened her eyes and breathed, 'There's *more*?'

'Lots. I love your warmth and your brightness of vision, your honesty and generosity of spirit, your knock knees...'

'I haven't got knock knees,' she said indignantly.

Grinning, he added, 'And the way you rise so nicely to the bait.'

As he finished speaking, the taxi drew up by the kerb and, sliding back the panel, the driver asked laconically, 'This it, guv?'

'Yes, this is it.'

Luke helped Jessica out, then paid the driver while she stared up at the tall, grey building.

City Flats might have ripped out the interior and turned it into utilitarian service flats, but she was pleased to see they had left the old and elegant façade, a reminder of more gracious days before cars had taken over from horses.

As though reading her thoughts, Luke said, 'At least they had the sense to leave the outside untouched.'

'Which floor is your flat on?'

'The top.' He pointed upwards. 'Right on the far corner.'

A hand at her waist, he shepherded her through the handsome doors, across the bare, brightly lit lobby and into one of the lifts.

When they reached his door, he opened it and, having flicked on the light, stooped and lifted Jessica high in his arms.

Breathlessly, she remarked, 'I thought only brides were carried over the threshold.'

'Not necessarily.'

She grasped his meaning instantly. 'Then you know what the tradition is said to be based on?'

Still holding her, he answered, 'I understand it's supposed to date from when the Romans carried in the Sabine women, who naturally were unwilling "brides".'

It was an emotive subject.

Feeling the sudden quiver that ran through her slim body, he asked levelly, 'But I take it you're not unwilling?'

'No, I'm not.'

'Good.' He bent his dark head and kissed her lightly on the lips.

Her heart began to pound and every bone in her body seemed to melt.

Michael had often kissed her with a lot more force and ardour, but his kiss had never affected her the way that thistledown touch did.

And that was only the beginning.

At the thought of what lay ahead, she began to tremble in earnest.

Lifting his dark head, Luke set her on her feet and asked casually, 'Would you like a nightcap?'

Not really, but a spot of Dutch courage might not go amiss... 'If you're having one.'

Luke removed his jacket and black bow-tie and unfastened the top button of his shirt to expose the tanned column of his throat. 'What do you say to a brandy? But first, so you feel at home, perhaps I'd better show you around.'

'It might save me getting lost,' she agreed.

He grinned. 'I admit it hardly comes into the "Ancestral Homes" category, but I'll do my best to make the tour interesting.'

Indicating with an expansive hand the small, impersonal room they were standing in, he intoned, 'As you can see, this is the living-room. Please, note the very handsome glass-topped coffee-table and the rare, geometrically patterned carpet. Next we have the galley kitchen, with its very own stainless-steel sink and microwave.'

'Then the bathroom, its two sliding doors communicating with the living-room and the bedroom. Notice both the compactness and the exquisite tiling.'

'I'd noticed.'

'The tiling?'

'The compactness.'

He had followed her in and they were standing crushed together.

'Mmm...' Putting his arms around her, he drew her back against him. 'There's a lot to be said for compactness.' Then he said judiciously, 'I suggest that in the morning when we have our shower...'

So he intended her to stay the night.

'We have it together. It'll save time, as well as water. Then afterwards, because it's bound to take less space, we can dry one another.'

'Dry one another?' she echoed, her voice sounding squeaky in her own ears.

'Doesn't that strike you as eminently sensible?'

Sensible hardly seemed the word, Jessica thought, going hot all over.

Easing them both through into the bedroom, Luke resumed his tour-guide manner. 'Now, last but not least, the bedroom, without doubt the most exciting room of all. Observe the mirrored wardrobe and the comfortable double bed, complete with two pillows...' As he spoke he pulled back the duvet invitingly.

Anticipation mingling with a suffocating excitement, Jessica looked anywhere but at the bed.

Noting her reaction, and misinterpreting it, he went on, 'And to add that Parisian touch, we have the *pièce de résistance*...'

On one corner, French windows opened onto a tiny wrought-iron balcony.

'Very impressive,' she said huskily.

'I'm glad you like it.' He stepped out onto the balcony.

'Oh, don't!' Jessica cried in alarm. 'It doesn't look at all safe.'

'It's quite safe, I assure you, and there's a spectacular view over the city. Come and have a look.' Turning, he took her hand and drew her out to stand beside him.

It was a lovely summer night, with a silvery disc of moon hanging in a clear blue sky. There was a warm wind blowing the stars about, and in the distance streetlights glowed like strings of topaz.

The pavement, far below, appeared to be deserted, but in the gutter a black and white cat chased, and pounced on, a piece of litter.

As Jessica stood still and silent, Luke's arm around her shoulders, feeling her tension, he asked, 'Something the matter?'

'I've always been scared of heights,' she said in a strangled voice.

'Why didn't you tell me?' he demanded, leading her back inside and closing the curtains.

'I didn't want you to think I was a coward,' she admitted.

'I wouldn't have thought any such thing. Lots of people are afraid of heights.'

'When I was small, one of my teachers told me that if I made a point of doing what I was afraid of, I'd be cured. It worked for spiders, I can lift them out of the bath now...'

Humorously, he said, 'In that case, when I find one in my bath I'll know who to call.'

'But unfortunately it didn't work for heights,' she added shakily.

'You're trembling.' Gathering her close, he cradled her head against his chest, his mouth muffled in her silky hair.

The French doors had been left ajar, and an errant breeze wafting through the curtains lifted the gauzy panels of her dress so they caught and clung to his dark trousers like a butterfly's wings.

For a little while they stood silent, while she enjoyed the wonderful sensation of being held in his arms.

Then, a hand beneath her chin, he lifted her face to his and asked, 'What about Michael?'

'Michael?' she echoed blankly.

'I mean, how do you feel about him? You once told me you were fond of him.'

'I've known him all my life.'

She hadn't been intentionally evasive, but Luke frowned. 'I need a straight answer, Jess.'

'Well I...I'm still fond of him, but just as a friend.'

'Then it's over between you?'

'Yes.'

'Have you actually told him so?'

'Yes. I went into the bank and talked to him.'

'How did he take it?'

'He was angry that his plans for the future had been turned upside down, rather than broken-hearted. It was a relief to realize that. I never wanted to hurt him.'

Curiously she asked, 'What made you ask about Michael?'

'I wondered if the thought of him was bothering you. I wasn't keen on the idea of making love to another man's woman...'

Hearing it put into words made a flutter of nervous excitement in her stomach. Aware that Luke was watching her, she tried to hide the jittery feeling.

She realized she'd failed when, letting her go, he asked lightly, 'Now, what about that nightcap?'

Knowing he was deliberately holding back, giving her time, she shook her head and jumped in at the deep end. 'I don't need one. Couldn't we just go to bed?'

She felt his extreme stillness, then he asked, 'Is that what you'd like to do?'

By way of answer, she put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

With a sound almost like a groan, he gathered her close

and deepened the kiss until her senses whirled and every nerve-ending sang into life.

While he kissed her, he slid down the fine zip at the back of her dress and, easing the filmy material from her shoulders, let it fall in a froth at their feet. A moment later her slip followed.

Stooping, he lifted her and, carrying her across to the bed, laid her gently on it. Slipping off her high-heeled evening shoes, he tossed them aside, then sat on the edge of the mattress, looking down at her.

Her body was slim yet curvaceous, clad only in a dainty scalloped bra and briefs and gossamer-fine silk stockings.

With deft fingers he undid her bra, exposing beautifully shaped breasts, fuller than they appeared when she was dressed.

Bending his dark head, he nuzzled his face against their firm softness, murmuring, 'You smell of springtime and orange blossom.'

Cupping them in his palms, he stroked a dusky pink nipple into life with his tongue, before taking it into his mouth and suckling sweetly.

She gasped.

'Don't you like that?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Good. I want to be able to touch and taste every inch of you before the night's over.'

His hands travelled downwards, easing her briefs over her hips and down her silk-clad legs. Slipping his fingers into the lacy tops of her stockings, slowly, and with care, he peeled them off one at a time.

When her pale gold body was totally naked, he looked his fill. She might have been embarrassed by such a close scrutiny if it hadn't been for his obvious pleasure in her.

'You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen,' he said

softly. 'Your body is perfectly proportioned and your skin is flawless.'

Stripping off his own clothes, he knelt beside her and, turning her onto her stomach, with the lightest of touches traced her shoulder blades, the length of her spine, the curve of her buttocks and her long, shapely legs.

She thought it was the most erotic thing that could happen to her until his mouth followed his hands, finding and stimulating erogenous zones she'd never even dreamt existed.

While she gasped and wriggled, his tongue laved the soft skin behind her knees, the soles of her feet and slipped between her toes.

When she thought she could stand no more, he turned her onto her back, and with leisurely enjoyment continued the exquisite torture, making her blood race through her veins and filling her with a hot urgency that wouldn't be denied.

'Luke...'

Though she'd barely breathed his name, he responded immediately. 'Yes, my love. Yes...'

As he fitted himself into the cradle of her hips, he whispered, 'I seem to have waited an age for this. I couldn't bear the thought of Dawson touching you, making love to you...'

She wanted to admit she'd lied to him, that she and Michael had never been lovers, but if she confessed that she was a virgin and not protected, he might refuse to make love to her.

If he did, she'd die of frustration, and at this time of the month the risk was minimal. Though could she afford to take *any* risk?

His first strong thrust drove all thoughts from her mind, and she gave herself up to the spiralling pleasure that grew

in intensity until it exploded, spreading its heat and radiance throughout her entire body.

For a while they lay entwined, her face buried against his throat, his weight a precious burden.

When his breathing and heart rate had returned to normal, he lifted himself away and, gathering her into the crook of his arm, pulled the duvet over them both before settling her head in the comfortable juncture between chest and shoulder.

Her body half-supported by his, his strong heartbeat beneath her cheek, she was lying in a haze of happiness when he asked quietly, 'What made you lie to me?'

Making no attempt to pretend she didn't understand, she retorted, 'What made you believe me?'

'I didn't altogether, but when I checked on Dawson he was squeaky clean. There was no trace of any other women in his life, so it seemed logical. But you haven't answered my question—why did you lie to me?'

'Your arrogance made me mad,' she admitted, adding a shade anxiously, 'You're not angry with me, are you?'

'I should put you over my knee and spank you.'

'Then you are angry?'

'No, not really. But why didn't you tell me tonight? Surely you must have realized the risk you were running? I don't mean healthwise, I've always been careful about that aspect...'

'Then why didn't you—?' She broke off, feeling awkward.

Understanding what she'd hesitated to put into words, he told her, 'Because you're different, special. I'm hoping to make you my wife—though I wasn't intending to get you pregnant *before* we're married.'

Her whole being incandescent with joy, she said breathlessly, 'It's the safest time of the month, so there's not much chance of that.'

'Then we have the rest of the night before us. There must be bits of you I haven't yet touched or tasted...'

A door closing with a slight bang and the sound of footsteps and voices in the hall brought Jessica back to the present.

The clock above the fridge showed it was almost three-thirty, her cup of coffee was stone cold and the cheese sandwich remained uneaten.

'There's Mummy's briefcase,' Alice's voice said. 'She must be home already.'

The kitchen door was flung wide and Stacy came rushing in like a small whirlwind, followed more sedately by Alice, a short, sturdy woman with blue eyes, grey curly hair and a complexion like a baby's.

'Mummy, Mummy,' the child cried excitedly, throwing herself into Jessica's arms, 'guess where we've been...'

'To the park?' she suggested, lifting the small figure onto her lap.

'After that.'

'I don't know. Perhaps you'd better tell me.'

A sunny-natured child, tall for her age and with her father's dark hair and grey eyes, Stacy could, as Alice frequently said, talk the hind leg off a donkey.

'We've been to see Emily's new puppies.'

Apparently knowing what was coming, Alice gave her employer an apologetic glance and went to fill and plug in the kettle.

'She's got five,' Stacy rushed on. 'They were all squirming and friendly and they licked my hand. Can we have a puppy, Mummy? Can we?'

Jessica's heart sank. The terms of her lease stated no pets.

'Not at the moment, I'm afraid. You see—'

'But, Mummy, I would feed it and be kind to it...'

'I'm sure you would, darling. But the lady who owns this flat won't allow us to keep any animals.'

'Why not? Doesn't she like them? She'd like these, they're golden Lab...Lab... What are they, Alice?'

Alice, who had been stooping to get a bottle of milk from the fridge, popped up like a pink-cheeked jill-in-a-box and supplied, 'Labradors.'

'Labradors,' Stacy repeated. 'Will you ask the lady if we can have one, Mummy?'

'But a puppy needs a garden, and we haven't got a garden. I'll tell you what, as soon as we get a house of our very own with a garden, we'll have one then, and you can choose its name. What do you think you'd like to call it?'

Temporarily sidetracked, Stacy gave the matter some thought, then said, 'I'll call her Henry.'

'Right, Henry it is. Now, what would you like to do before your bathtime? Shall we play at something, or would you prefer me to read you a story?'

'Can I make some chocolate monkeys and some gingerbread lions?'

Amongst the presents Stacy had had for her last birthday had been a toy cookery set with a wooden rolling pin, a pair of scales and a zooful of animal cutters. Since then she'd been into baking in a big way.

'Yes, of course, if that's what you'd like to do. Run along and find your apron and things while I get the flour out.'

As the child skipped happily away, Alice threw the cold coffee down the sink and asked, 'Ready for a cup of tea?'

'I'd love one.'

'You're home well before your usual time,' she remarked, as she filled two cups with the amber brew.

'Yes, Mr Franklin gave me the afternoon off.'

'Don't tell me he's getting soft in his old age!'

'Hardly.'

'Then what's the occasion?'

'I'm going away on business, and I have to make a very early start in the morning. I'll need to tell Stacy before she goes to bed tonight.'

'Where are you off to?'

'New York.'

'I think you'll like the Big Apple. How long for?'

'Three or four days.' The despondency came through.

'You don't seem any too happy about it,' Alice commented shrewdly.

'I'm not,' Jessica admitted. 'I hate to leave Stacy.' Her voice wobbled dangerously.

'Well, there's no need to sit there looking like a dying duck in a thunderstorm,' Alice said with tart kindness. 'This is really a wonderful chance, and Stacy will be quite all right. Though she loves you very much, she's not a clingy child.'

Leaning forward, she patted Jessica's hand. 'Now, don't you go fretting yourself. I'll take good care of her, and we'll find plenty to do. Everything will work out fine, you'll see.'

Giving the older woman an impulsive hug, Jessica said unsteadily, 'We're so lucky to have you.'

Jessica was met at JFK Airport by a smooth-faced, fast-talking junior executive from Leroy.

'Miss Fenton? How do you do? My name's Van Edison, but please call me Van.'

He was tall and thin, with fine sandy hair, blue eyes, and a sprinkling of freckles across his nose.

Shaking her hand, he added with an engaging smile, 'It will be my pleasure to look after you while you're in New York, and to provide any help or information you may need. Let me take this.' Relieving her of her case he began

to lead the way across the bustling concourse towards the exit.

'I hope your flight was a good one, Miss Fenton?'

There had been a lot of turbulence and, still unhappy about leaving Stacy, Jessica had been on edge for most of the time. But realizing they were using the easy coin of politeness, she answered, 'Fine, thank you... And, please, do call me Jessica.'

Leaving the air-conditioned building was like walking into an oven. Sun poured down mercilessly from a clear blue sky. There was a smell of hot metal, overheated rubber and melting tarmac.

Perspiration sprang out on Van Edison's forehead and, taking a handkerchief from his pocket, he mopped ineffectually at his brow.

'I hope it's not too hot for you? We're having an Indian summer. For the past few days it's been up in the eighties. I'll be glad when it breaks.'

A sleek, chauffeur-driven limousine was waiting for them. As soon as Jessica was installed, Van Edison joined her in the air-conditioned comfort with a sigh of relief.

As they left the airport behind them and headed into Manhattan, he said, 'I understand you've made this trip at very short notice, so I guess you weren't given too many details?'

'Hardly any,' she admitted. 'All I was told was that the seminar is due to take place today, but I don't know where.'

'It's being held at the Belmonte-Ruisse Hotel, on 5th Avenue. We're heading there now.'

'What time does it start?'

'The preliminaries started a couple of hours ago, but I'm hoping we'll be there in plenty of time to hear the important part. Fortunately you're booked into the same hotel, which will facilitate matters.'

'I understand there are to be further meetings?'

'Yes, I'll give you all the details as soon as I get them...'

He was still talking when they drew into the forecourt of the Belmonte-Ruisse Hotel.

Glancing at his watch, he remarked, 'Not as much traffic as I'd feared, so thankfully we've made good time.'

Bringing the car to a halt, the chauffeur jumped out smartly and held open the door.

Jessica stepped out to find the air was heavy with dust and traffic fumes, and heat gripped the city like a sweaty fist.

Taking her case, Van Edison escorted her over to the hotel. Rather than the glass and concrete skyscraper she'd been expecting, it was a handsome, older-style building with an elaborate dome and a porticoed entrance.

They crossed the quietly luxurious lobby to the desk, where Jessica signed in and was given the key to her room.

'If you want someone to take your case up,' Van suggested, 'there's just about time for us to grab a bite to eat in the bar.'

'I ate on the plane, so I'm not really hungry. Why don't *you* get something while I go and freshen up and make a quick phone call home?'

'Fine by me. Will half an hour be long enough?'

'You can make it twenty minutes if you like.'

'Sure?'

She nodded.

'Then I'll see you back here in twenty minutes.'

CHAPTER FOUR

JESSICA'S room was on the seventh floor and looked out over Central Park, where the trees were already taking on the bright colours of autumn.

Thrilled by the view, but with no time to linger, Jessica set about making her phone call.

When Alice had assured her that all was well, and Stacy was her usual happy self, she added, 'She's here, if you'd like a word.'

A moment later Stacy's treble came piping over the line. 'Mummy, Angela says I can go to her party...'

Her daughter sounded so close that tears welled up in Jessica's eyes.

'She's having jelly and balloons and a real live mag...mag...' Prompted by Alice, she finished triumphantly, 'Magician.'

'How lovely,' Jessica said, furiously blinking away the tears.

'And guess what else we're going to do that's even *more* exciting—?'

In the background, Alice said, 'Weren't we going to keep that a secret so we could surprise Mummy?'

'Oh, yes, I forgot.'

'Silly billy. Now, hadn't you better say goodbye?'

'Bye, Mummy.'

'Bye, darling. Be a good girl, won't you?'

When Alice came back on the line she said, 'Just in case you need me, I'm staying at the Belmonte-Ruisse Hotel on 5th Avenue. This is the number if you can jot it down...'

'Got it,' Alice said, adding, 'Sounds a posh place.'

'It is, but I'd sooner be home. Must go. I'll call again tomorrow.'

Replacing the receiver, she hurried into the well-appointed bathroom. Having washed her face and hands and made up lightly, she smoothed her hair and scrutinized her appearance in the long mirror.

She couldn't afford to let Foster Gilles down.

Satisfied that she looked smart and businesslike, she checked that she had a notepad and pens in her shoulderbag and made her way down to the foyer where Van Edison was waiting.

'Perfect timing.' He gave her a friendly smile. 'The previous speaker has just finished.'

The seminar was being held in the hotel ballroom, and at first glance the large room seemed to be packed, every single chair taken. But without hesitation he led her down the centre aisle to a row about a third of the way from the front, where seats had been kept for them.

They had been in their places only a short time when the hum of conversation faded. A moment later it was replaced by a buzz of anticipation as Leroy International's Chief Executive Officer approached the podium, wearing a well-cut business suit and trailing aides like a contender for the White House.

From the back, Jessica could see that he was tall, a minimum of six feet, with broad shoulders and thick dark hair that wanted to curl.

Her breath caught in her throat as it had so many times when she'd glimpsed a tall dark stranger who might not be a stranger at all.

When he mounted the stage and turned to his audience she found herself staring at an attractive, hard-boned face that had enough charm and charisma to draw most females' second glances—and eighth.

A face that was shockingly familiar.

She put a hand to her diaphragm as if physically winded. 'Good-looking devil, isn't he?' Van murmured, genuine admiration in his voice. With quick concern he said softly, 'You've gone as white as a sheet. Are you OK?'

Somehow Jessica found her voice and managed, 'Yes, thank you, I'm fine.' When he still looked doubtful, she added, 'With so many people, it just seemed a bit warm in here, that's all.'

She was relieved when Van turned his attention back to the speaker.

Like someone who was still feeling the effects of being punched in the solar plexus, she listened to Leroy's CEO greeting the assembled company and introducing himself.

'I imagine you all know I'm Luke Ransome, and you certainly know why I'm here...'

Her head a little bent, afraid to look at him in case her gaze should somehow—amongst all those other gazes—attract his attention, she thought desperately, Oh, dear God, what am I going to do?

While one part of her mind struggled to cope, to think of some way out of this unforeseen nightmare, she heard Luke start to detail Leroy's plans for worldwide expansion.

After a minute or so she risked a furtive glance. Wearing a lightweight grey suit and a white shirt, he looked tanned and fit, if somewhat leaner than she remembered him.

Speaking without notes, and winning the doubters over by charm, he went on to sketch in the overall business climate and provide an impressive array of facts, statistics, percentages and confident predictions of Leroy's prospects.

It was a dazzling performance, which obviously inspired the audience as there was a spontaneous burst of applause when he finished speaking.

Without a break the question period began, and for almost an hour he answered with the same expertise all the points that were raised.

From time to time Van glanced at Jessica, as though expecting her to take a more active part in the proceedings, but afraid of drawing attention to herself, she kept her head down and her role to that of listener.

The seminar finally over, the room began to empty swiftly. It was Saturday afternoon, and most of the delegates had plans for what remained of the weekend.

Luke left the platform and, still surrounded by aides, moved towards the nearest exit without looking back, shaking hands as he went.

'Let's go through to the bar and get a drink,' Van suggested. 'You must be more than ready for one.'

Terrified of running into Luke, Jessica hesitated.

Noting that hesitation, Van added, 'Or there's coffee, if you'd prefer?'

Striving to sound casual, she asked, 'Will your Chief Executive Officer be there?'

'No, he's done his bit, he'll be off somewhere now. He usually makes a point of keeping his weekends free, so we're not likely to see him before Monday, possibly Tuesday.'

As they made their way through the thinning crowd in the direction of the bar, hardly daring to believe that Luke would be absent for the rest of the weekend, she queried, 'Then he won't be at the other meetings?'

'Shouldn't think so. Though it was his decision to expand, and he launched the project, other senior executives will almost certainly take over from here. You see, he's surrounded himself with first-class people and, unlike most top men, he's willing to delegate...'

When they reached the spacious lounge bar it was half-empty. Van chose a black leather settee by one of the windows, and as soon as they were settled he asked, 'Now, what's it to be?'

Jessica's mind obsessed by more important things, she

answered abstractedly, 'I really don't mind. Whatever you're having.'

'Two White Ladies,' Van said to a hovering waiter.

Realizing too late that, still dehydrated from the flight, it would have been much more sensible to ask for coffee or a fruit drink, Jessica could have kicked herself.

She was wondering whether she could ask Van to change the order when with smooth efficiency a tray of cocktails, accompanied by dishes of nuts and pretzels, was placed on a small table in front of them.

Her stomach still feeling as if it was tied in knots, she avoided the nibbles and sipped carefully.

'So what did you think of our CEO?' Van queried.

'I was very impressed by his efficiency.' It was the truth, as well as what her companion wanted to hear.

'He's absolutely brilliant,' Van enthused.

'His performance today certainly was,' she agreed.

'I imagine a lot of hard work went into it,' Van said thoughtfully. 'But there's no one in the company works harder than Luke Ransome. Even so, he's far from being a workaholic. He makes time for what he wants to do. In his place, I'd do the same. After all, what's the use of having a lavish lifestyle—a 5th Avenue penthouse, a helicopter, a private jet, a house in the country—if he doesn't take time to enjoy it?'

Remembering Susan, Jessica steeled herself and said, 'I should imagine his wife agrees with that sentiment.'

'He isn't married—'

She felt a completely irrational surge of relief.

'Which leaves him free to play the field, I guess.'

'And does he?' she asked. Then wished she hadn't.

'Hard to say, really. He's always seen in public with a beautiful woman on his arm, and it's never the same one twice. But oddly enough, while he must be every woman's dream, as far as his private life's concerned he seems to

steer clear of any entanglements. Of course, that might just mean he's too clever for the press to get hold of anything... He's certainly nobody's fool. Since his grandfather died and he took control of Leroy, it's gone from strength to strength, while companies managed by lesser men have gone down.'

'And been swallowed up by Leroy, no doubt?'

Seeing Van looked surprised by her tone, she added with more care, 'Somehow I got the impression he could be ruthless.'

'Well, you know the old saying, "There's no sentiment in business." And though he can be ruthless when necessary, he's known to be fair-minded and to have high principles...'

Jessica gritted her teeth. The way he'd made Michael a scapegoat had been neither fair-minded nor high-principled.

'He's also got a reputation for being extremely generous, as well as helping to support a good number of charitable institutions and suchlike.'

'Presumably he can afford to?'

'A lot of people can *afford* to...' Leaving the sentence unfinished, Van asked, 'Another drink?'

She shook her head. 'No, I don't think so, thank you. I'm starting to feel a bit light-headed.'

'I expect you're hungry?'

'No, not really. I think it must be the time difference catching up on me.' Plus alcohol on an empty stomach.

Studying her still pale face, he suggested, 'It might not be a bad idea to snatch a bit of sleep. It's almost five now. What if I give you a call about seven? I can fill you in on the details of the other meetings, then take you out for a spot of dinner and a look at New York by night.'

'That sounds wonderful.' She tried to inject some enthusiasm into her tone. 'So long as I'm not interfering with your private life.'

'Not at all,' he assured her dutifully. 'See you in a couple of hours, then.'

Back in her room Jessica stood by the window, staring blindly out over Central Park, her mind a confused jumble of thoughts.

Thrown completely off balance by seeing Luke so unexpectedly, her panicky impulse had been to hide, then at the first opportunity to run, to go straight back to the airport and return home as soon as she could get on a flight.

But if she messed things up with Leroy, her position with Foster Gilles might well be on the line.

Stanford Franklin had put himself out to help and advise her, and he expected a great deal in return. He wouldn't be likely to tolerate her private life, her emotions, getting in the way of business.

Men didn't allow such things to happen. Men were reliable. But in the face of stiff competition he had given the post to a woman and, needing it so badly, she had been grateful beyond words and determined to be worthy of his trust.

Over the next weeks and months and years she had worked herself into the ground to achieve what she had achieved. How could she chance throwing it all away?

Jobs weren't easy to come by, and with Alice's wages to pay she couldn't afford to be out of work, even for a short time.

She kept personal spending to a minimum, bought only clothes for the office, left her hair long to avoid hairdressing bills, skimped on her lunches and, whenever possible, walked to save bus and tube fares. Even so, there was only just sufficient to meet her commitments.

Which in real terms left her with little option. No matter how difficult or painful, she *had* to stay and do her job to the best of her ability.

She could only hope and pray that Van Edison's assess-

ment of the situation was correct. If Luke was away and she could attend the meetings and leave without him ever setting eyes on her, she would be home and dry.

And should the projected business between the two firms go ahead, forewarned was forearmed. If there was the slightest danger of running into Luke, she would find *some* way to avoid it.

Feeling a shade more cheerful, she turned her mind to the more immediate future.

She had almost two hours before Van Edison was due to pick her up, but it would make sense to get ready now. That way she could sleep until he arrived.

Realizing that there might be a need for more than business clothes, she had brought one casual outfit and a black cocktail dress.

Quickly she unpacked her case and hung up the dress, relieved to see it wasn't creased. It was several years old, but she consoled herself with the thought that classic styles altered very little.

In the luxurious, oyster-tiled bathroom she showered and cleaned her teeth quickly, before brushing out her long light brown hair, streaked gold by the weekends spent in the summer sun with Stacy.

Then, having made up lightly, her hair still loose around her shoulders and wearing only fresh stockings and undies, she stretched out on the bed.

When Van called, she could be on her way down in just a minute or two.

It seemed strange to think of herself setting off to see New York when in London it would be the middle of the night and Alice and Stacy would be fast asleep...

Both the bed and the temperature were comfortable, and almost before the last thought was completed she had drifted off.

She awoke with a start to hear knocking at the door. A bleary glance at her watch showed it was barely five-thirty.

Surely Van wasn't an hour and a half early?

But perhaps her watch was wrong. She'd adjusted it to New York time on the plane, and hadn't checked it since.

Her mouth was desert dry, and she felt dazed and slightly sick. The last thing she wanted was to be taken out for a meal but, committed, she would have to make the best of it and go.

'Just a minute,' she called. Scrambling out of bed anyhow, she pulled on her dress.

About six inches from the top the back zip jammed and, one-handed, she was still trying to release it as she opened the door.

Luke had changed from his dark grey business suit into smart casuals, and looked both dangerous and attractive. 'Having trouble?' he enquired as he stepped inside, forcing her to fall back.

'You!' she gasped.

His eyes on her chalk-white face, he remarked, 'I see you weren't expecting me. Did you imagine I hadn't noticed you?'

He hadn't appeared to, and she found herself wondering how he'd managed to pick out one face amongst such a crowd of people.

'What do you want?' she croaked.

'I decided we should have a talk.'

'I don't want to talk to you.'

'Forgive me, but I thought that was why you were here. What you were being paid for.' Ramming home his point, he went on, 'I fail to see how you can do your job if you refuse to talk to me.'

Her voice hoarse, she informed him, 'I'll be at the meetings.'

'Well, I won't.'

'That's up to you. But apart from going to the meetings, I'll do—'

'Exactly what I want you to do,' he broke in with cold determination.

As she started to shake her head he said, 'My dear Jessica, it's about time you understood that you have no choice in the matter. I hold all the cards...'

His thickly lashed grey eyes pinning her, he added, 'So may I suggest that you finish getting ready? Then we can be on our way.'

'Where are we going?'

The question, without her realizing it, signified her surrender, and he smiled with grim satisfaction as he answered, 'Out to dinner.'

Flicked on the raw by that smile, she attempted a rear-guard action. 'Van Edison's taking me.'

'He's been relieved of that pleasure.'

'I don't want to have dinner with you.'

'I thought I'd made it clear that it's what *I* want that counts? Now, if you'll turn around, I'll fix that zip.'

With the greatest reluctance she obeyed, one hand gathering up her long, silky hair and drawing it over her shoulder.

As Luke freed the snagged teeth and eased up the zip, his fingers brushed the smooth skin of her back, and she shuddered in response.

Feeling that frisson, his hands moved to lightly grip her shoulders, and while she stood there, transfixed, he bent to touch his lips to the warmth of her nape.

Standing quite still, she wondered helplessly why he was doing this. Was it to prove his mastery? To make her squirm? To exact some kind of revenge? Or maybe a combination of all three.

When his lips began to travel leisurely up the side of her neck she wriggled and tried to pull free, but his grip tight-

ened, keeping her there, while his tongue tip traced the delicate whorls of her ear.

Her heart racing, she made a fresh effort to pull away, and as though in retaliation his teeth gave the lobe a sharp little nip, making her gasp.

Feeling the grip of his fingers relax, she thought he was about to release her, but with a sudden movement she was totally unprepared for he turned her into his arms.

A second later his mouth was on hers. Punitive rather than tender, his kiss held passion and anger, and a deep hunger that shook her to the core.

After all that had happened, it seemed he still wanted her.

Since she had left him, she had kept all her natural needs and desires packed in ice, steering clear of any man who might want to get too close.

Now the ice cracked and an answering hunger welled up inside. Nothing in the world existed but this man and what he was making her feel.

When he finally let her go, eyes closed, she staggered a little, and Luke was obliged to steady her with a hand on either arm.

She felt confused, thrown off balance, shocked and disconcerted that he still wanted her; even more shocked by her own instinctive response to a man she hated.

But she was a flesh-and-blood woman, and after being alone so long perhaps she would have responded to any man's kiss?

Watching as she struggled to pull herself together, he remarked flatly, 'You're not wearing the same perfume.'

When she said nothing, he asked, 'Why have you changed?'

She'd had to. Carissima had been too evocative of those few weeks in her life she'd wanted so desperately to forget.

Finding her voice with an effort, she answered, 'I felt like trying something new.'

He frowned. 'I don't like this one nearly as much.'

'Oh, I *am* sorry,' she said sarcastically. 'But as it's toiletries rather than perfume—' she could not longer afford perfume '—I'm afraid you're stuck with it. Unless it puts you off so much that you'd sooner have dinner alone and leave me here?'

Apparently amused by her show of spirit, he smiled. 'Good try, but no.'

'Then I'd better do something with my hair.'

'Leave it as it is,' he instructed. 'I like it.' Softly, he added, 'I've often imagined how you'd look with really long hair spread over my pillow.'

As she stood there, heat like molten lava running through her entire body, he pushed her gently into the nearest arm-chair.

Reaching for her court shoes, he crouched on his haunches to slip first one and then the other onto her slender feet.

It was something he had done in the past, and she'd found the small intimacy charming. It had made her feel cherished and very special.

Knowing with hindsight that she'd been neither, it was just another unwelcome reminder of the past.

As soon as he straightened up and moved away, Jessica rose unsteadily. Trying to keep a hold on practicalities, she picked up her shoulder-bag and started to transfer the items she might need to her evening purse.

After a moment or two she heard Luke prowling about, opening drawers and the sliding doors to the walk-in wardrobe. Wondering what he was up to, she glanced around.

With deft efficiency he was collecting her belongings and putting them back in the case.

Startled, she demanded, 'What on earth are you doing?'

'Saving time,' he answered laconically. 'You'll need your things.'

'Why?' she asked, her voice sharp. 'Why will I need my things? You said you were taking me out to dinner, and that's all I've agreed to.'

'Dinner happens to be at my place, and you'll be staying there with me, rather than at a hotel.'

'I'll be doing no such thing! I'm booked in here, and I haven't the faintest intention of moving.'

He clicked his tongue reprovingly. 'I was expecting rather more co-operation from the representative of a firm that's hoping to do business with me.'

'Well, you won't be getting it,' Jessica retorted recklessly.

Sighing, Luke said, 'In that case, I shall be forced to have a word with Stamford Franklin. He had high hopes that Leroy would become one of his biggest clients, so I don't suppose he'll be any too pleased when I tell him about your refusal to co-operate and threaten to call the whole thing off.'

'Y-you wouldn't do that,' she stammered.

Luke grinned mirthlessly. 'Do you want to bet?'

'But you can't go to those lengths just because I've refused to stay at your apartment.'

'Would you have refused if Leroy's boss had been anyone other than myself?'

Watching her transparent face, he said, 'No, of course you wouldn't. This kind of hospitality is fairly common in business...'

She couldn't be sure how true that was.

'So when you tell Franklin why you flatly refused to fall in with my wishes, he'll no doubt think it somewhat strange.'

Cornered, she made an effort to fight back. 'If necessary

I'll tell him I preferred to stay at the hotel because you're not married.'

'How do you know I'm not?'

'Van Edison told me.'

Wondering if she might have got that amiable young man into trouble for gossiping, she said hastily, 'I mentioned a wife, and he merely said you didn't have one. I thought you might have married Susan,' she added witheringly.

Luke's jaw tightened a little before he asked smoothly, 'And were you pleased or disappointed to find I hadn't?'

'Try indifferent,' she snapped. But to her dismay she felt her cheeks grow warm.

'Then why does me not being married make such a difference? I have a perfectly respectable, middle-aged house-keeper.'

'It's not the same as being married.'

'Would you have agreed to stay with me if I *had* been married?'

'No, I wouldn't,' Jessica said flatly.

'So how will you explain that to Franklin?'

'If necessary I'll tell him that I insisted on staying at the hotel because you'd made a pass at me. He expects me to work hard, but he wouldn't expect me to tolerate that kind of thing. He's from the old school, an old-fashioned man with good old-fashioned standards...'

But even as she spoke she realized that using that particular line of defence, though true in essence, would create its own problems.

Her swift rise in the firm—what had been seen as her preferential treatment—had inevitably caused a lot of barely concealed resentment and jealousy.

There would undoubtedly be male colleagues within Foster Gilles who would be only too pleased to point out

that had a man been doing the job there would have been no such problem.

Trying not to show her sudden doubt, she added firmly, 'Mr Franklin has very strict principles.'

'So I've heard,' Luke agreed. 'In fact, he has a reputation in the business world of selecting, where possible, staff who are whiter than white.'

Afraid of where that was leading, she made no comment, but he pursued the issue. 'Tell me, Jess, does he know about your...shall we say...not quite pristine past?

'No, I can see he doesn't. So when you tell him how I made a pass at you, will you also tell him how we were once lovers? How you were more than happy to go to bed with me? How you were having my baby and—'

'Stop it!' she cried hoarsely.

'Well, if you're not prepared to tell him the whole story, I might have to. After all, my reputation is at stake. I shouldn't imagine he'll be too pleased about the way you've deceived him—'

'What makes you think I've deceived him?'

'Haven't you?'

Biting her lip, she failed to answer.

'And when you're forced to admit it, even if he doesn't fire you, he could well make your position at Foster Gilles untenable...'

Well aware that that was so, Jessica shivered. In his own way Stamford Franklin was as ruthless as Luke.

'On the other hand, you could just do as I ask and leave Franklin in blissful ignorance of how *mistaken* he is about you.'

When Jessica said nothing, he added, 'The choice is yours.'

Only there was no choice. Luke might well be bluffing, but she couldn't afford to take the risk, and somehow he knew it.

He raised a dark brow. 'So, which is it to be?'

Remembering that scorching kiss, she said huskily, 'If the sole object of this exercise is to get me into bed, to have some fun at my expense...'

'I can assure you it isn't.' He sounded as if he meant it.

Knowing she would have to take his word for it, she agreed reluctantly, 'Very well, I'll come.'

He put the last of her belongings into the case and zipped it up. 'I'm glad you've decided to see sense.'

Gritting her teeth at that provocative remark, she pushed her soft evening purse into her shoulder-bag and accompanied him to the lift.

When they reached the lobby and passed the check-in desk, she suggested, 'Hadn't I better explain that I won't be needing the room after all?'

'It's already been taken care of,' Luke told her with cool matter-of-factness.

His words proved beyond a doubt that he had *expected* her compliance, and she wondered resentfully what had made him so sure his blackmail would work, so certain that she'd toe his line.

He wasn't aware of Stacy's existence, so he couldn't know just how desperately she needed to keep her job.

On the forecourt just beyond the hotel entrance, a sleek silver Mercedes was drawn up. Luke tossed her case into the back, before opening the front passenger door and handing her in.

In an age when good manners were largely obsolete, Jessica had always found his easy, unselfconscious courtesy a pleasure.

A moment later he slid behind the wheel and reached to turn on the ignition.

Glancing his way incautiously, she met his silvery eyes. Seeing the expression of almost fierce triumph they held, she shivered.

The look was almost immediately masked, and as though to set her at ease he asked lightly, 'Shall we have some music?'

Borrowing his tone, she answered, 'Why not? It might help to keep me awake.'

'Suffering from jet lag?'

'Afrid so.'

'Yes, crossing the Pond this way is always the worst. We'll have to make sure you get a good night's sleep so you're fresh for what's to come.'

There was something about the way he spoke, some nuance, a hidden *purpose*, that unsettled her afresh.

It was suddenly and alarmingly borne upon her that there might be a whole lot more to this move than she had first suspected.

Luke had said the object wasn't to get her into bed, so what was it? Why had he gone to so much trouble to force her hand?

CHAPTER FIVE

LUKE set a CD playing softly as they joined the stream of early evening traffic and began crawling at a snail's pace along 5th Avenue, with its soaring buildings, its brightly lit shops and elegant department stores.

Van Edison had told her that Luke's penthouse was on 5th Avenue, so they couldn't have far to go. Jessica felt a panicky urge to jump out of the car and run.

But there was nowhere she could run to, no way she could escape. Trapped by circumstances, she was at Luke's mercy.

And he knew it.

Though, thank the Lord, he didn't know the full extent of her vulnerability.

Unconsciously, she sighed.

As they drew to a halt at a red light, he put a hand beneath her chin and turned her face to his. 'Having second thoughts?'

'And third.'

He laughed, as though he thought she was joking, before returning both hands to the wheel as the light changed to green.

Luke had asked her that same question once before, she recalled, though her answer then had been vastly different. It had been after the theatre, on the way to his flat, the night she had tacitly agreed that they should become lovers.

Thinking back to that night, and how her decision not to tell Luke she wasn't protected had affected her whole future, she knew that, despite all the anxiety her daughter's

birth had brought, she wouldn't have had it otherwise. Stacy was the most precious thing in her life...

The atmospheric clip-clop of 'On The Trail' from Ferde Grofe's *Grand Canyon Suite* brought Jessica back to the present. It had always been one of her favourite pieces of music, and she wondered if Luke had chosen it with that in mind.

Glancing out of the window, she was surprised to see that 5th Avenue, with its bustling life and bright lights, had vanished. They seemed to be driving through a very much quieter, less affluent part of the city.

Puzzled, she said, 'I understood that you lived on 5th Avenue?'

'Something else Edison told you?'

'Yes,' she admitted reluctantly. 'Was he mistaken?'

'No. I have a penthouse in the Irton Tower, only we don't happen to be going there.'

'You said you were taking me to your apartment.'

'If I remember rightly, I said "my place". You jumped to the conclusion that I mean the apartment.'

'Well, if we're not going to your apartment, where are we going?'

'Upstate. I have a house just outside Ashstock that I use at weekends.' With a glance at her face he went on, 'Don't worry, I have a resident housekeeper, as well as the day staff.'

Even so, being taken upstate seemed a lot worse than simply staying in Manhattan. Thoroughly alarmed, she said, 'I don't want to end up in the wilds.'

'Admittedly Ashstock's in a rural setting on the slopes of a hill overlooking the Hudson River Valley, but it's hardly in the wilds.'

'Please, Luke, can't we just stay in town?' she found herself begging.

'I'm afraid not.' He was quietly adamant. 'You see, Mrs

Low, my housekeeper, is expecting us, and all my plans for the next couple of days are made.'

Plans that involved *her* presumably? But he'd been tied up with the seminar until late afternoon, so when had he found time to make all these plans?

Reading her thoughts with unnerving accuracy, he said, 'Making plans doesn't take long. It's making them *work* that takes time and effort.'

Jessica couldn't imagine any plans he made *not* working, so she could only hope that they were associated with business.

Carefully, she remarked, 'Van Edison mentioned that there were to be some further meetings.'

'That young man's a mine of information.'

Wanting to thrash it out, to be given the kind of mundane details that would set her mind at rest, she gritted her teeth and asked, 'When are they scheduled for exactly?'

'Didn't Edison tell you? How remiss of him.'

Realizing vexedly that Luke was playing with her, and unwilling to give him any further fun at her expense, she relapsed into silence.

The seat was the last word in comfort, and with tiredness rolling over her like a thick fog, smothering any lingering agitation, she leaned her head back against the soft leather and stifled a yawn...

Suddenly bathed in bright light, Jessica stirred and opened heavy eyes to find they had stopped in front of tall, wrought-iron gates. The lights showed a high security fence with wooded country on either side, and perched on top of a pole, like a mechanical vulture, a slowly scanning security camera.

As she struggled to sit up straighter, the gates slid aside to allow them entry, and closed behind them again with noiseless efficiency.

'Designed to keep out the paparazzi.' With a kind of self-mockery, Luke answered her unspoken thought.

A moment later they had passed what appeared to be a lodge and were following a drive that wound first through woodlands, then between terraced gardens to an unusual, split-level house built into the hillside.

It had curving white walls, lots of large, lighted windows, a wooden deck on the lower level and overhanging eaves on the upper.

Luke drew up on the paved apron, and with a strange note in his voice said, 'Welcome to Bear Lodge.'

'Bear Lodge?' she repeated thickly, uncertain whether she'd heard right.

'That's what it's always been called, so when I bought it a couple of years ago I decided to keep the name, though any real bears have long since gone.'

He slid from behind the wheel and, having collected her case, came round to open her door.

Fumbling beside the seat, she picked up her shoulder-bag and, with Luke's hand beneath her elbow, climbed out. Stumbling a little, feeling like the walking dead, she was shepherded across the porch and into the house.

As Luke closed the door behind them, she glanced around and found herself in a spacious living area.

Simplicity seemed to be the keynote.

As well as some comfortable-looking furniture, there was an eclectic mix of objects. A beautiful old globe stood in an alcove and a cuckoo clock hung on the wall. There was a rack full of magazines and several bookcases overflowing with books.

A massive stone fireplace stood on the outer wall, its alcoves stacked with logs redolent of pine. Two identically carved bears formed the uprights supporting the mantelpiece. Their bodies and limbs were of grizzly bear propor-

tions, but their faces had the appealing, seriously silly expression of a child's teddy bear.

The walls were painted a soft pumpkin colour, and the curtains were made of folkweave. Rugs in various shades of green and blue, russet and gold, tangerine and ivory lay on the gleaming floorboards.

Everywhere there was space and colour and beautifully polished wood. It was the home of a man who, though obviously wealthy, liked his living to be easy, unpretentious.

A short, elderly woman, neatly dressed in navy blue, came through a nearby door and greeted them in a faint but unmistakable Scottish accent. 'Good evening, Mr Luke, Miss Fenton.'

Jessica made an effort to return the housekeeper's friendly smile, as Luke said, 'Evening, Annie.'

'You've made good time,' she commented.

'The traffic wasn't too bad once we were out of the city.'

'Well, dinner's ready and waiting. But perhaps you'd like to freshen up first?'

The question seemed to be addressed to Jessica, who answered gratefully, 'I would, please, if it won't spoil the meal?'

'Not a bit of it. It's all there, keeping hot.' Solicitously she added, 'You're looking mighty peaky.'

'I'm feeling rather tired.' That was an understatement. The abrupt awakening after too short a sleep had served to stupefy her.

'Jet lag, I dare say.' The housekeeper shook her head sympathetically. 'When I come back after seeing my family, it takes me days to adjust... Now, shall I show you upstairs?'

'It's all right, you save your legs,' Luke said. 'I'm going up myself.'

She nodded. 'I've put the lassie in the blue room, as you suggested.'

A hand beneath Jessica's elbow, Luke escorted her to where a hickory staircase climbed to a long landing with several doors leading off it.

'My housekeeper's taken a liking to you,' he commented, as they made their way up the stairs.

Finding it an effort to put one foot in front of the other, she asked, 'How can you possibly tell?'

'I've known Annie for a long time. I inherited her from my grandparents. Apart from the fact that she called you "the lassie", she said you looked peaky. If she hadn't liked you she would never had made such a personal remark.'

Opening a door to the right, he added, 'This is the blue room.'

It was a charming room with ivory walls and thunder-cloud-blue paintwork and curtains. There was a small four-poster bed with a blue and gold canopy, and a blue, scarlet and gold rug was spread on the polished floorboards.

To the left, down a couple of steps, a partly open door led to a luxurious bathroom tiled in blue and ivory.

The windows were open wide, and after the heat and stuffiness of town the mountain air felt pleasantly cool and fresh.

Putting her case on top of a beautifully carved blanket chest, Luke said, 'Come down when you're ready.'

Jessica murmured a polite 'Thank you' and heard the door close quietly behind him.

It had been a long, long day. So much had happened that her brain seemed numb, incapable of coherent thought.

All she wanted to do was fall into bed and sleep until this stupefying weariness had gone but, though she felt like a zombie, a kind of perverse pride insisted that somehow she make it through dinner.

At the moment she could think no further ahead than

that. Gathering herself, she went through to the bathroom and washed her face and hands in cold water, before running a comb through her hair.

From the mirror, an ashen-faced spectre with hollow cheeks and purple shadows like faint bruises beneath her eyes stared back at her.

Damn Luke Ransome! she thought violently.

Unwilling to go down looking like a ghost, she found her cosmetic purse and made up with care, before taking her hair up in a neat coil.

Satisfied with the results, and feeling a shade more human, and therefore more confident, she made her way downstairs to find Luke lounging on the deep settee, reading a newspaper.

Tossing aside the paper, he rose to his feet, every inch the courteous host. Leading her over to where a table was informally set for two, he pulled out her chair.

To one side, several dishes were keeping warm on a hostess trolley. Picking up a plate, he asked, 'What will you have?'

She shook her head. 'I'm not really hungry.'

'When did you last eat?'

'On the plane,' she admitted.

His mouth tightening ominously, he cut a good-sized portion of golden-crusted chicken pie and, adding a colourful selection of roasted vegetables, put the plate in front of her. 'Make a start.'

As she opened her mouth to protest he said, 'You'll feel a lot better with some food inside you.'

'I don't—'

'Do you want me to have to feed you? I'm prepared to, if necessary.'

Green eyes met and clashed with grey.

Scared by the look of purpose she saw there, and know-

ing he was perfectly capable of carrying out his threat, she picked up her knife and fork and reluctantly began to eat.

After the first few mouthfuls the hollow, slightly nauseous sensation disappeared, and she started to feel much better.

His object achieved, Luke resumed his air of polite host, asking, 'Would you prefer wine or mineral water?'

'Water, please.' She still felt dehydrated.

He filled two glasses with chilled water and, having helped himself to food, sat down opposite her.

Studying her neat, businesslike hairstyle, he said with undisguised mockery, 'Very *Miss Fenton*.'

'Why not? After all this *is* a business weekend, isn't it?'

'Business I deal with during the week. Weekends I keep solely for pleasure.'

'So Van Edison told me.' The words were out before she could prevent them.

'Edison appears to have told you a good deal.'

'Please, don't hold it against him,' she said quickly. 'He was only putting me in the picture.'

'Really?'

'I asked if you would be at the rest of the meetings...'

'And were presumably pleased when he said no?'

'I was *ecstatic*,' she shot back.

He smiled as though amused, before asking tauntingly, 'Were you really hoping to get through the visit without meeting me face to face?'

Making no effort to hide her animosity, she informed him, 'For the past four years I've been hoping never to have to set eyes on you again.'

A white line appeared round his mouth, and for a moment she watched him visibly battle for control before he went on evenly, 'So you didn't know that I was Leroy's CEO?'

'If I'd had the faintest idea, wild horses wouldn't have dragged me here.'

'The realization must have come as something of a shock.'

Unwilling to admit just what a shock it had been, she said, using the understatement of the century, 'I can't say I was pleased to see you.'

'Whereas I was *delighted* to see you,' he told her smoothly. 'Now, can I get you anything else to eat?'

'No, thank you.'

'Some coffee?'

She shook her head.

'Sure?'

'Quite sure.'

'Feeling better?'

'A bit.' Ashamed of her grudging answer, she admitted, 'Well, a lot, actually. You were quite right, I did need to eat.'

She'd thought he might crow but, his face serious, he said gently, 'I'm glad you're feeling better.'

Flustered by his unlooked-for kindness, she harked back to their previous conversation and a point that had been puzzling her. 'There was such a crowd at the seminar, I don't know how you ever picked me out.'

'I'd arranged where you would be sitting, so I knew just where to look. In any case, I'd watched you and Edison arrive back from the airport...'

As her head came up sharply, he added, 'I was tempted to come to JFK and meet you myself, but I thought better of it.'

In a strangled voice, she charged, 'Then you knew I was Foster Gilles' analyst before I even got here?'

'Yes, I knew who Miss Fenton was.'

'How did you know?'

'It's a long story. I'll tell you tomorrow.'

'Why can't you tell me now?'

'Because it's high time you went to bed. Despite the gallantly applied make-up you look absolutely shattered, and we've a busy couple of days ahead.'

Noting the 'we', she remarked, 'I thought you didn't intend to work over the weekend?'

'I don't. But even the pursuit of pleasure can be tiring.'

On that cryptic note Luke rose to his feet and came to pull out her chair. 'I'll see you upstairs.'

Glancing up at him, Jessica saw that his eyes were fixed on her mouth, and froze. Remembering the hunger of his previous kiss, and beset by a sudden suspicion that he might kiss her again, might follow her into her room, she said thickly, 'There's really no need. I can see myself up.'

He smiled wryly, as though he'd read her thoughts. 'Then I'll say goodnight.'

Reaction making her legs feel like jelly, she answered, 'Goodnight.' And turned hurriedly away.

Wanting to run, she forced herself to walk sedately. She was at the foot of the stairs when his voice said, 'Oh, Jess...there's no need to lock your door tonight, unless it makes you feel safer.'

Refusing to either answer or look back, she climbed the stairs, only too aware that he was standing quite still, watching her.

Once in her room with the door closed behind her, Jessica breathed a sigh of relief and, knees trembling, sank down on the blue counterpane.

The bedclothes had been turned down and the curtains pulled across the still open windows. A jug of iced water and a tumbler stood on the bedside table.

As she glanced around her eyes were drawn to the door, and the large, ornate key that was in the lock. Remembering Luke's mocking 'There's no need to lock your door to-

night', she crossed her arms over her chest and rubbed them, as though she were cold.

There had been a faint but disturbing emphasis on the word 'tonight', which had almost certainly been a deliberate attempt on his part to unsettle her.

The knowledge that he *wanted* to unsettle her made the thought of the coming weekend a deeply unnerving one. He was like a cat with a newly caught mouse, she thought bleakly, a mouse that he wanted the fun of playing with.

But when he'd had enough of his cruel game, would he let her go? How often did the poor mouse escape?

Repressing a shiver, she reminded herself that she was no helpless mouse. When it was time for her to return home, he would *have* to let her go. And once out of his clutches she would take good care never to fall into them again.

First, however, she had to get through the next forty-eight hours.

Though surely when she'd had a good night's sleep she would feel better. More able to cope with whatever the weekend might bring.

And it wasn't as if they were alone. Mrs Low would be here, and she'd taken an instant liking to that kindly soul.

Somewhat reassured, Jessica got up and, yawning widely, opened her case and took out her nightie and dressing-gown.

She couldn't immediately find her sponge bag, and when a short search failed to locate it, having noticed earlier that there was a tube of toothpaste and a new brush in the bathroom, decided to use them.

As soon as she'd cleaned her teeth and creamed off her make-up, she climbed into the four-poster and settled herself beneath the light coverings.

In spite of any lingering worries, she was asleep almost before her head touched the pillow.

Jessica stirred and became aware of birds singing, and somewhere close at hand the sound of a helicopter. A shaft of bright sunlight slanting through a gap in the curtains lay warm across her closed eyelids.

The air coming through the open windows was balmy, without being humid, and sweetly scented with something that smelt like myrtle.

For a while she lay half asleep and half awake, enjoying the comfort and the feeling of well-being that bodily ease brought.

Lulled by the pleasantness of it all, she had almost drifted off again when her brain kicked into action, ruthlessly pulling the plug on her sense of well-being.

The euphoria draining away, she recalled all that had happened the previous day, and groaned aloud while questions assailed her.

How had Luke known who she was? And why had he insisted on her staying with him?

It was plain that, though he might still *want* her, his feelings were far from friendly. Beneath that cool veneer she could sense anger and resentment...

Yet why should *he* feel that way?

Those feelings rightly belonged to *her*.

He was the one at fault, the one who had lied and cheated and betrayed both her father and herself.

But while she could never forget the past—it was too inextricably tied in with the present—she had finally started to come to terms with it. No longer thinking ‘if only’ but gradually accepting the fact that no power on this earth could change a thing.

Therefore it was ironic in the extreme that she should meet Luke again now, just as she was getting her life and her emotions back on an even keel after more than four years of upheaval.

Since the evening her father had brought him home, he'd had a tornado-like effect on her life.

The first few weeks she'd been caught up in a delirious whirl of happiness. When she'd found Susan and Luke together, the impact of his perfidy had been savagely destructive.

She might not have discovered what was going on if her father hadn't been taken ill at the theatre. They had gone as a foursome, and after Luke had seen the other three safely back to Alexandra Place, Susan had persuaded him to stay the night...

Worry about both her father and what she now knew was a worsening situation at the bank, Jessica was unable to sleep. Badly needing Luke's strength, the reassurance he could offer, she slipped along to his room.

Mindful that people were sleeping, she tapped lightly at his door and walked in.

Susan, blonde and beautiful in a semi-transparent negligee, and Luke, his dark hair rumpled, clearly fresh from the shower and wearing a towelling robe, were standing together. Her head was on his shoulder and his arms were holding her close.

The shock was so great that for what seemed an age Jessica stood rooted to the spot. Then, feeling like someone stabbed to the heart, mortally wounded, she turned on her heel and walked blindly away.

Later that night her father died in his sleep from heart failure, and the following morning it became public knowledge that Ransome Enterprises had taken over the bank.

Totally devastated, refusing to talk to either Susan or Luke, Jessica shut herself in her room and, dry-eyed, went through the days to her father's funeral frozen in icy misery.

Michael, wearing a black tie and looking pale-faced and

haggard, was at the chapel, along with his father, Tom Dawson.

After the service Tom, a lifelong friend of her father's, came up to Jessica to pay his respects.

She noticed that though he was coolly civil to William's widow, he avoided speaking to Luke, and left as soon as good manners allowed.

When little groups of people began to straggle back to the cars Michael, pulling his ear nervously, appeared by her side.

Eyeing Susan and Luke standing together, he asked, 'Are you going back with them?'

'No.' Jessica had refused to come in the same car, and had sat in a different pew during the service.

'Then can I take you for a drive in the country?'

Dreading having to go back to a home that was no longer hers and mingle with Susan and Luke and the rest of the mourners, she nodded gratefully.

A grey duvet of cloud sagged low, and before they were out of London a thin, miserable drizzle had started to fall.

Neither spoke, and the only sound was the metronomic click of the windscreen wipers.

His fair face set, Michael drove until, having left the suburbs behind, they reached a well-known beauty spot. Following the serpentine road to the top of Sprainton Hill, they stopped at a lookout point.

Nothing much was visible through the murk and drizzle and, hardly surprisingly, theirs was the only car there.

Turning to face her, Michael said gruffly, 'I don't need to tell you how sorry I am about your father, Jess. I was genuinely fond of him.'

Knowing that was the truth, she nodded.

'I never thought it would end like this...' Then he said bitterly, 'He fired me, you know.'

'Dad did?'

'Luke Ransome. As soon as the takeover deal went through, he fired me.'

Stunned, she asked, 'Why?'

'Because when he started poking and prying he found that one transaction I'd handled hadn't worked out right. On the strength of that, he blamed me for most of Doyles' problems. He told me I'd acted recklessly and irresponsibly, and dismissed me as though I were some office boy.'

Her heart aching for him, she asked, 'So what will you do now?'

'My brother-in-law's offered me a job as office manager in his export firm. It's a comedown after the bank, but I might have to take it for a while.'

Viciously, he added, 'If it hadn't been for that swine Ransome... But I suppose you're still in love with him? Still hoping to marry him?'

She shook her head mutely.

'Why not?'

'He's having an affair with someone else,' she said, her face stony.

'I always knew he wasn't to be trusted. I told you so. It was a bad day for everyone when Susan brought him over from the States—'

'Susan brought him over?'

'Well, it was because of *her* he came.' Looking at Jessica's blank expression, he said, 'Didn't you know?'

'No.'

'She persuaded him to come, she thought he might be able to help.'

'Help to do what? I don't understand. I was told he was over in the UK to study our banking methods.'

'That was just a cover.'

'A cover for what?'

'Doyles had lost a lot of money on an overseas investment that had gone down the drain. Troubles are like swal-

iows, they never come singly. Several other things had gone wrong, and the bank was getting a bit rocky...'.

'I knew things were difficult but I hadn't realized they were *so* bad.'

'Because Susan knew Ransome—who was apparently the latest whizkid on the New York financial scene—she suggested that she should ask him to come over in an advisory capacity. When your father expressed doubts that he'd come, she told him Luke was the kind of man who would do anything for a friend...'

But in this case *more* than a friend, Jessica thought bitterly. Aloud, she said, 'I knew absolutely nothing about this. Why didn't anyone tell me?'

Michael looked uncomfortable. 'I expect your father didn't want to worry you, with the exams and everything...'

Sounding stunned, she summed up slowly, 'So Luke was supposedly giving advice on how to get Doyles out of the mess it was in, but instead he saw his chance and took it over.'

'Exactly. You've got it in one. I imagine Susan regrets involving him now it's too late.' Wryly, he added, 'I hear that as soon as things are settled she'd going back to New York.'

'She's not staying in London?'

'What is there to stay for? I know she has a sister over here, but the rest of her family and friends live in the States.'

And, of course, after successfully adding Doyles Merchant Bank to his empire, Luke would, no doubt, be going home.

'It might also be a question of money,' Michael went on, 'as William died virtually bankrupt, and the house is mortgaged up to the hilt.'

That her father had been in such dire financial straits was

something Jessica hadn't known and, startled, she asked, 'Are you sure about the house?'

'My father is William's executor.'

'No wonder Dad had been looking so harassed,' she said sadly. 'He must have known he was on the verge of losing everything.'

'If it hadn't been for Ransome's determination to take control of the bank, we'd have pulled through somehow, and your father might still be alive...'

When they returned to London, and Michael drove her to Alexandra Place, she asked, 'Are you coming in for a cup of tea?'

He shook his head. 'Ransome will almost certainly be here, so I doubt if I'd be welcome.'

'I have more right here than Luke Ransome. If I want to invite my friends in, I will.'

'It's no use stirring up more trouble,' Michael said hastily, 'especially on a day like this. I'd better get off home. Take care.'

As soon as she reached the door he drove away, as if all the hounds in hell were after him.

Jessica let herself in quietly. Hearing the murmur of voices from the living-room, she went straight upstairs, her mind a jumbled mass of sombre thoughts.

Everything she'd learnt that afternoon had added to her wretchedness. Her dislike of Susan, and her bitter hatred of Luke, grew. He'd taken everything, betrayed both her father and herself.

For her father it was all over, he was at peace. But she had to live with the results of that betrayal.

So what was she to do?

She had no job—she would have died rather than work for Luke—no home, as the house was nominally Susan's, and no one who cared a fig for her.

Added to that, she had very little money.

Incapable of making plans, her thoughts going round and round in endless circles and getting nowhere, for the next few days she existed in a kind of vacuum, eating little and sleeping less.

It was then, when she was at her lowest ebb, that she found she was pregnant and suffering from morning sickness—‘morning’ being a misnomer, as the feeling of dizziness and nausea plagued her throughout most of the day.

Towards the end of the week, after one of her sudden departures from the table, Susan followed her to the bathroom and found her hanging hollow-eyed and limp over the washbasin.

Though they had been living for days in a state of icy non-communication, Susan was kind. Putting an arm around her stepdaughter, she wiped her ashen face with a cool flannel, and said quite matter-of-factly, ‘It’s Luke’s, of course.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Jessica said bitterly, ‘I won’t tell him.’

‘Don’t be a fool, you have to tell him.’

‘Aren’t you afraid he’ll offer to marry me?’

‘Look, Jess, I know that you’ve never liked me and are quite prepared to think badly of me, but you’ve absolutely no cause to think badly of Luke—’

‘Don’t bother to lie to me. I know what I saw.’

Shrugging away the supporting arm, she went on hoarsely, ‘It was clear from the start that you wanted him. Well, you can have him! Now Father’s dead there’s nothing to stop you marrying him. That is, if he’s prepared to marry a woman ten years older than himself.’

As soon as the cruel words were out she felt a sense of shame. Though she had plenty of reasons for disliking her stepmother, it was inexcusable to attack her in this way.

‘I’m sorry,’ she muttered. ‘I shouldn’t have said that.’

Susan shrugged her elegant shoulders, then asked practically, 'So what do you intend to do?'

'I don't know.'

'Look, when you've decided, I'll give you what help I can. In the meantime, there are things I need to tell you when you're ready to listen.'

She wouldn't ever be ready to listen, Jessica thought mutinously. She'd had enough lies and deceit to last her a lifetime.

CHAPTER SIX

BUT while it failed to solve anything, that conversation acted as a catalyst. Realizing that for her baby's sake, if nothing else, she must make an effort, Jessica rejoined the world.

Unwilling to accept help from a woman she could still feel nothing but dislike for, the following day, through an employment agency, she found herself a 'start immediately' secretarial job.

'All I need now is somewhere to live,' she remarked.

As though her luck was in, the young woman who had interviewed her knew of a bedsit that might be to rent in the building she herself lived in. 'The girl who's had it for the past six months moved out this morning.'

Looking at Jessica's well-cut suit, she warned, 'It's not particularly salubrious, but if you're not too fussy...'

'I can't afford to be.'

'In that case, I'll give you the address.'

'Thanks,' Jessica said gratefully.

Within the next hour, with just enough money to pay the necessary month's rent in advance, the bedsit was hers.

That afternoon, while the Regent's Park house was empty, she packed her few personal belongings and without a word to anyone moved out of the only home she'd ever known.

The first week or so at her new job she had a struggle to keep going, to hide how awful she felt, but things became much easier when, thankfully, the feeling of sickness abated.

Knowing that as an expectant mother she should have a

good diet, she bought a cheap paperback book on healthy eating, and for the first time in her life learned how to cook.

Creating a careful framework of daily habit, she was starting to feel settled, to think of the cramped bedsit as home, when out of the blue Luke turned up.

His unexpected appearance destroyed any slight peace of mind she had managed to achieve. And the possibility of him returning to uncover her lie about the baby made it imperative to move once more...

A sudden breeze billowing the blue cotton curtains brought her back to the present and, sighing, Jessica pushed herself up into a sitting position.

Peering at her watch, she discovered it was gone eleven-thirty, so she'd more than slept the clock round. She found herself wishing she could sleep for the rest of the weekend and only wake up on the plane going home.

But that was being cowardly. It was high time she girded her loins and went into battle.

Yesterday, tiredness, combined with the shock of seeing Luke, had cut the ground from under her feet, leaving her unable to hold her own. But today, refreshed, and over the worst of the shock, she was prepared to stand up to him, let him see he couldn't walk all over her.

Grinning wryly at this jumble of metaphors, she got out of bed and went to draw back the curtains. It was a lovely autumn day. The sky was a wide expanse of cornflower blue and sun poured down as golden as honey.

Bear Lodge was high up and beautifully positioned, with breathtaking views over the Hudson River Valley. Leaning out of the window a little and looking down, Jessica could see that the lodge was semicircular, and built into the hill-side on several descending levels.

It was unusual and totally charming and made her think of a squat lighthouse.

Here and there on its white walls were climbing plants and vines, their reds and golds and russets making a wonderful blaze of colour.

Across the gardens and terraces she could just glimpse in the far distance, between the trees, the heavy chain-link fence that surrounded the property.

Remembering the electronic gates and the surveillance equipment, she felt a chill run down her spine. It would have been easy to have walked out of a penthouse apartment, but it wouldn't be easy to walk out of a place like this.

Was that why Luke had insisted on bringing her here? To make sure she couldn't just leave if she wanted to?

Oh, don't be a fool, she told herself severely. Luke was a very rich man, and therefore a possible target for criminals as well as the paparazzi. The security was to keep people *out*, not *in*.

Still, she couldn't altogether banish the feeling of being trapped.

A baby breeze playing hide and seek through the trailing scarlet swags of a Virginia creeper carried with it the appetizing smell of freshly ground coffee.

Loving her morning coffee, she sniffed appreciatively, and withdrawing from the window went to find something to wear.

Opening her case, she took out fresh undies, a pair of smart-casual sandals and a button-through silk dress patterned in swirls of grey and white, before renewing the search for her sponge bag.

There was no sign of it and, having gone through everything twice, she came to the conclusion that it must have been left at the hotel.

From what she remembered through the blur that had been last night, the bathroom had appeared to have every-

thing a guest could wish for, so she would borrow what she needed.

Apart from odd wisps that had escaped, her hair was still pinned up from the previous night so, stripping off her nightdress, she turned on the shower, stepped into the cubicle and, eyes closed, fumbled for the shower gel.

A moment later the confined space was filled with steam and perfumed bubbles. Carissima. She couldn't mistake the scent. It was achingly familiar, and only too evocative of the past.

Made uneasy by the coincidence, and wishing she hadn't had to use it, she dried herself and put on her clothes.

A cabinet with pearl-tinted glass doors hung on one wall. Deciding that if there was any different gel in there, next time she had a shower she would use that, she opened the doors and looked inside.

On one shelf there were matching toiletries, and on the other every cosmetic a woman might conceivably need, including body spray and perfume. She was looking at a complete range of Carissima products.

It seemed it was no coincidence. Luke had supplied all these purposely. Which meant he'd known *well in advance* that she would be coming here.

Hang on, how could he have known *well in advance*? It wasn't possible. She hadn't known herself until the day before yesterday.

But presumably, as soon as her flight had been fixed, someone at Leroy had been advised to expect a Miss Fenton, and Luke had admitted he'd known that *she* was Miss Fenton, so would that have given him time?

Apparently.

Though *why* had he gone to so much trouble when she was only going to be here for a couple of days? Well aware that Luke never did anything without a good reason, she felt uneasy.

Remembering how displeased he'd been when he'd discovered that she'd changed to another fragrance, she came to the conclusion that he'd probably left her sponge bag behind on purpose.

But today she was fighting back.

Taking off her clothes again, she stood under the warm running water until she felt certain she'd washed all traces of Carissima from her skin, then she got dried and dressed once more.

Knowing that careful make-up would hide any lingering paleness and boost her confidence, she went through to the bedroom to find her cosmetic purse.

The previous evening, after creaming off her make-up, she'd left it on the dressing-table.

No, it wasn't there. She must be mistaken.

A quick look around both the bedroom and the bathroom, followed by a more comprehensive search, failed to locate it.

Oh, this is ridiculous, she told herself crossly. It couldn't have vanished into thin air.

But it had.

So what was going on? she wondered as she brushed out her hair. It was too much of a coincidence that both her sponge bag and her cosmetic purse were missing.

Catching sight of the cabinet reminded her that it was well stocked with the brand of cosmetics she had once preferred.

Her mouth tightening, she pushed away the treacherous thought. There was no way she was going to let Luke win.

A few minutes later, her hair once more taken up into a smooth coil, her face devoid of make-up and schoolgirl shiny, she went down the stairs in a belligerent mood.

There was no sign of Luke, or Mrs Low, and the house was still and stone quiet. Deciding to explore, she opened

the nearest door and found herself in a pleasant and spacious dining-kitchen.

There was still no evidence of Luke, and though the aroma of coffee hung on the air, there was no percolator or coffee-making equipment in sight.

At the far end of the kitchen, open double doors gave on to a broad flight of steps that led down to another level.

Descending them curiously, she discovered an extremely well-equipped gymnasium, a sauna, a Jacuzzi and a good-sized swimming pool complete with poolside loungers.

The outer curve of wall was comprised largely of glass, and looked out onto a paved patio bright with tubs of flowers. Quite a few of the tinted-glass panels had been slid aside to make the complex virtually open-air.

One section of wall, made to swivel so that it could face either inwards or outwards, contained a built-in barbecue, a mini-bar and a sophisticated-looking coffee-making machine. On the hotplate, a glass jug of coffee was bubbling away merrily.

Her eyes were drawn to the pool, where Luke was doing a fast, stylish crawl, his wet head seal-dark, his arms cleaving the water with scarcely a splash.

As though sensing her approach, he glanced up, and when he reached the side hauled himself out, water pouring down his big frame and long, muscular legs.

Her mouth went dry. He was stark naked.

With an all-over tan, and carrying not a spare ounce of flesh, he looked fit and healthy, his clear skin gleaming like oiled silk.

She had always loved the smooth elegance of his lithe, well-proportioned body, finding it far more sexy than the hairy-macho type.

Completely absorbed by the pleasing ratio of width of shoulder to narrowness of hip, she stood and stared, unable to tear her gaze away.

Watching drops of water trickle down his flat stomach and into his pubic hair, she was rocked by a surge of desire so strong that it made her tremble.

It had been so long. So long...

'Take care,' he warned softly.

'What?' She looked up, her wide, greeny-gold eyes appearing dazed and unfocused.

'Surely you can see what you're doing to me?'

Confused, flushing vividly, Jessica called herself all kinds of fool. The situation was explosive enough, without her adding to the tension.

She must go, turn and walk away, before he realized what the sight of his nakedness was doing to *her*.

But as though her body rebelled at the discipline her will was trying to impose, her legs refused to carry her. She had missed him so. Missed his touch. Being held close. Being held...

'It's been a long time.' He echoed her own thought.

'Yes.'

Luke's voice changed. 'Too long... Give me your hand.'

No, she couldn't let herself do this.

But after the long years of denying her natural needs she was so acutely physically lonely it was like an all-pervading ache.

Holding out his hand palm uppermost, he said, 'Stop thinking and give me your hand.'

Moved by an instinct stronger even than self-preservation, she put her hand into Luke's.

His fingers closed around hers, cool and strong. Drawing her to his still-damp body, he took her in his arms and kissed her gently on the mouth.

No, no, this was madness...

As though she'd spoken the thought aloud, he whispered, 'It's all right. Everything's all right.'

Taking her face between his palms, he kissed her again,

this time deepening the kiss until every bone in her body seemed to melt.

While he kissed her, one of his hands moved down to cup her breast, caressing the soft curves through the silky fabric of her dress.

Jessica's hand caught his and, tearing her mouth free, she choked, 'No, I can't. I can't...'

'Why not?' he asked huskily. 'You know you want to.'

Stooping, he lifted her in his arms and, carrying her a few paces, laid her down on one of the wide sun-loungers and sat down by her side.

Struggling to find the strength to fight not only him but herself, she covered her breasts.

Shaking his head, smiling a little, he moved her hands away, placing them one each side of the thick, padded cushion. 'Keep your hands there. We're going to take this slowly.'

'Luke—'

'Hush.' With unhurried concentration, as though opening a gift where anticipation was part of the pleasure, he began to undo the buttons of her dress.

'Someone might see us,' she protested hoarsely.

'No one will see us. Annie's already left, and the rest of the staff have the weekend off. The only people still on the premises are the two security guards, who live in the lodge.'

Slowly, and with care, he stripped off her clothes, tossing each one in turn onto a nearby chair.

Looking at her pale golden body as if it was something rare and precious, he took a breast in each hand and began to gently tease the pink nipples between his thumbs and forefingers.

She gave a little gasping cry and begged, 'Don't.'

'Shh... I've dreamt about this... About seeing you naked... Making love to you...'

Unable to stop what was happening to her, but at the same time unable to bear it, she turned her head and looked away from those experienced hands that were giving such bitter-sweet pleasure.

She had expected to look out to the patio, but instead the thick tinted glass reflected the little scene like a mirror.

With a feeling of unreality, she saw a woman's pale, slender body and a man's darker hands fondling and caressing it.

Then, as though observing two strangers, she watched him bend his dark head and take one nipple in his mouth while his fingers continued to play with the other, causing sensations so exquisite they were almost like pain.

Every nerve-ending in her body zinged into life, the blood raced through her veins and a core of liquid heat formed in the pit of her stomach.

She wanted to close her eyes against the erotic images, but was unable to. Like a voyeur, she watched his free hand travel downwards and slip between pale thighs, dragging all sensation with it.

Her heart racing, her breath caught in her throat, she closed her eyes tightly while, engendered by those skilful fingers, a feeling of intense pleasure gathered momentum like a lighted fuse travelling towards a keg of dynamite...

'Luke...' Shuddering and gasping, she cried out his name, and in response he gathered her close and held her until the shudders subsided and her breathing returned to normal.

Releasing her, he got to his feet and, taking a white towelling robe from a hook, slipped it on and belted it.

His attitude as casual as though they'd been sitting discussing the weather, he remarked, 'I'm going to take a quick shower. When you're dressed, lunch is waiting on the patio... Or perhaps you'd prefer a coffee first?'

His words were like rocks he'd hit her with, and in

stunned disbelief she watched him turn and walk away, his bare feet padding silently on the mosaic flooring.

Though he had given her the release she'd craved, she was left feeling desolate and abandoned. She had wanted *him*. Wanted to feel the weight of his body, to cradle his head to her breast, to *share* the experience...

That he should just walk away and leave her was a shock, the last thing she'd expected. Knowing he'd been fully aroused, she wondered why, after forcing the issue, he hadn't satisfied himself.

Maybe his intention had been to humiliate her?

Or had he just responded to a need that must have been only too obvious? But if that was the case, why hadn't he simply made love to her and satisfied them both?

Her thoughts having come full circle, she began to pull on her clothes with shaking hands.

Either way, she felt ashamed, mortified, appalled by her own weakness. How had she managed to make such a mess of things in so short a time?

The answer was quite obvious. She had looked at Luke and instantly all the old fascination, the *wanting*, the feelings she had hoped were safely buried had sprung to life.

But how could she still be so emotionally tied to a man she knew to be both ruthless and treacherous? It made her the worst kind of fool, and filled her with bitter self-contempt.

She wanted to hide, to not have to face Luke ever again. Yet face him she must. There was the rest of the day to get through.

Needing something to steady her, she poured herself a cup of coffee and began to sip the scalding liquid.

Luke had made it plain that he didn't work at weekends, which seemed to indicate that none of the meetings that had been talked about were to take place here.

In that case, why was *she* here?

Luke had said it wasn't simply to get her into bed, and what had just happened seemed to prove it. She would have been easy game, and he'd failed to take advantage.

So the question remained.

And it wasn't the only one. Why were they alone here? Why was there no staff?

'Ready to eat?'

Jessica jumped as Luke appeared by her side. Facing the opposite way, she hadn't seen him coming and his approach had been silent.

He was dressed in stone-coloured trousers and an olive-green, open-necked shirt. His hair, cut shorter than she remembered it, was still damp and trying to curl. He looked tough and sexy and formidable.

Careful to avoid his eyes, she replaced the empty coffee-cup and began to move towards the patio, her legs feeling as jerky as a puppet's.

Cupping her bare elbow in a proprietorial hand, he led her to a table in the shade where the housekeeper had left a cold buffet.

Trying her hardest to hide her embarrassment, to appear cool and composed and mistress of the situation, she sat down.

The sunlit air was fresh and balmy. Looking over the gardens, she could see amongst the trees on the lower slopes of the hill a scattering of houses, a squat church tower and, beyond, a glint of water.

Taking a seat opposite her, Luke peeled the clingfilm from a number of dishes. Apparently remembering well her likes and dislikes, he avoided the smoked salmon and prawns and began to help her to a selection of cold meats.

Covertly, Jessica studied his face—the handsome, slightly upslanting eyes above high cheekbones, the bony nose, the strong chin with its intriguing cleft, the mouth that was both disciplined and warmly passionate...

Suddenly becoming aware that he was watching her watching him, she looked down hurriedly.

Smiling a little, he added tossed green salad to the plate and placed it in front of her.

'Thank you.'

Luke helped himself to a small amount of seafood and began to butter a roll.

His hands were long and lean and muscular, with blunt fingertips and neatly trimmed nails. Exciting hands... Tearing her gaze away with an effort, she moistened her lips.

While they ate, needing something to say, and hoping to get the answers to some questions, she asked, 'Why did you give your housekeeper the rest of the weekend off?'

'It happened to *be* Annie's weekend off,' he answered easily.

'But doesn't she *live* here?'

'Yes, but she usually spends her free time with a friend in Greenwich Village.'

Taking a bottle of white Californian Chardonnay from a cooler, he lifted a dark brow. 'Wine? Or would you prefer fresh orange juice?'

'Orange juice, please.' Carefully, she enquired, 'How many staff do you employ?'

'Here?'

Jessica nodded.

'Apart from Annie and two security men who work shifts, four, all from the village. Josie who helps out in the house, Tom who takes care of the pool and the gym and looks after the cars, and a couple of gardeners.'

'And I suppose it just happened to be *their* weekend off as well?'

Luke's white teeth gleamed and the creases at each side of his mouth deepened as he smiled ironically. 'How did you guess?'

Ruffled, she snapped, 'I'd just like to know *why*...what you hope to gain.'

'Some privacy, for starters. What's the problem? Don't you like being alone with me?'

Ignoring that provocative question she said, 'You told me you didn't work at weekends.'

'That's right,' he agreed.

'So presumably the meetings Van Edison mentioned won't be taking place here?'

'Right again.'

Her fears confirmed, she demanded, 'So why did you bring me here? I'm in New York to work, to do a job. Foster Gilles are paying me to go to those meetings.'

'Don't worry, as soon as I have all the details I'll fill you in on everything that's been discussed. Now, would you like anything else to eat?'

Shaking her head, she persisted, 'But I may need answers to questions, points clarified. How can I do an analysis unless I have all the facts? I need to *be* there. I don't want to be...stuck here...' She'd almost said 'trapped' and had just stopped herself in time.

Unwisely, she added, 'And in answer to your question, no, I don't like being alone with you.'

'Afraid of what might happen to you?'

Swallowing, Jessica asked sharply, 'What could possibly happen to me?'

'Oh, all kinds of things.' Luke's voice held a hint of soft menace.

'You're just trying to frighten me,' she accused shakily.

'Why would I want to frighten you?'

To throw her off balance. To keep the upper hand...

When she said nothing, he observed wryly, 'Even if you can't think of a single reason, I appear to be succeeding. You're looking quite pale, and I'm sure it can't be lack of

sleep... When I took a look at you earlier this morning, you were still slumbering like a babe.'

'You came into my room?' The idea of Luke standing watching her sleep made her distinctly uncomfortable.

'You didn't lock your door.'

'I will tonight.' As soon as the words were out she wished she'd kept silent.

To hide her discomfort, Jessica hurried into speech. 'If I'm pale it's probably because my cosmetic purse has vanished.'

'There's everything you need in the bathroom cabinet,' he said evenly.

'I've no intention of using that so, if you don't mind, I'd like my own make-up back.'

'Ah, but I do mind.'

'Then you *did* take it. Why?'

'I prefer you to smell and look like the girl I used to make love to.'

'But I'm not that girl any longer. I'm not the naïve, trusting fool I used to be.' The resentment spilled over. 'I've done a lot of growing up since then.'

'You may have done some growing up, but it's my bet that you've *altered* very little.'

'You know nothing about me as I am now.'

Smiling, he disagreed. 'On the contrary, I know a great deal about you.'

Her heart in her mouth, she challenged, 'What do you know?'

He began to tick the points off on his fingers. 'I know you've become a successful businesswoman in what is still basically a man's domain. I know that at the moment you're Stamford Franklin's blue-eyed girl. I know you've changed your name...'

Well, if that was all. She was breathing a silent sigh of relief when he asked, 'What made you choose Fenton?'

'It was my mother's maiden name.'

'Why did you change it?'

'Why do you think?'

'So I wouldn't succeed in finding you, presumably.' Grimly, he added, 'And it worked very well.'

'But surely you haven't kept looking all this time?'

'I've never stopped looking. But London's a big city, and with a change of name it's a good place to disappear in.'

Afraid to ask, but needing to know, she blurted out, '*Why did you want to find me?*'

'Let's call it unfinished business. Too many loose ends that still needed tying up.'

An involuntary shiver running down her spine, she asked, 'How did you manage to find me?'

'In the end it was pure chance,' he admitted, as he rose to pour coffee for them both. 'Susan was in London, visiting her sister, and she happened to catch sight of you coming out of Foster Gilles' offices. She rang up and told me.'

It seemed fate was against her, Jessica thought bleakly. But, having seen her, why couldn't Susan have minded her own business? Why had she thought it necessary to tell Luke?

Having passed her coffee, Luke resumed his seat and went on, 'However, when I made discreet enquiries I found that there was no Jessica Doyle amongst that firm's employees.'

'At first I was afraid that you might have been just a casual visitor, but when my private detective started to watch the place, you were seen entering and leaving on a regular basis. Which seemed to prove beyond doubt that you worked there.'

'By a process of elimination, I discovered that you were

calling yourself Jessica Fenton. It occurred to me that you might be married...'

Luke's face was cool and impassive, his voice almost casual, but she knew with a sudden insight that his feelings were vastly different.

'It was a relief to discover that you were referred to as "Miss Fenton", and that you weren't wearing a wedding-ring.'

Why was it a relief? Jessica wondered uneasily. What difference did it make to him?

She found herself objecting, 'Not wearing a ring doesn't mean a thing these days.'

He lifted a dark brow. 'Are you saying you *are* married?'

Resisting the impulse to say she was, she admitted, 'No, I'm not married.' Then, hoping it would act as a safeguard, she added, 'But I do have a partner.'

'Do you now? More coffee?'

Hoping it would serve as a distraction, she nodded.

Luke refilled both their cups before asking, 'What's his name?'

Taken by surprise, for a second or two she floundered, her mind a blank, before she said, 'It's Michael Dawson. You remember Michael?'

'Indeed I do. A cold fish if ever there was one. No wonder you were frustrated, in need of...shall we say, *comfort*?'

Her face flaming, she said sharply, 'I wasn't in need of anything.'

'Oh, come on!'

'Michael is everything I want in a man.'

'Then why aren't you married? Or is he no longer so interested in marriage now that he doesn't get the bank as well?'

'How can you say a rotten thing like that?'

'I'm just being honest. It was obvious the bank meant a great deal more to him than *you* did.'

'If you knew how much it meant to him, how could you throw him out as if he were some office boy, rather than a man who—'

'Looked on Doyles as his?'

'Why not? He had every right to. My father regarded him as the son he'd never had.'

'Or the son-in-law he was hoping to have? Prince consort to the queen?'

Lifting her chin, she said coldly, 'When Michael and I were married, Dad intended to leave us the bank jointly. Doyles and Dawson.'

'And presumably told Michael Dawson as much? Which is a great pity. Believing the bank was as good as his, it made him headstrong and reckless. With your father solidly behind him, he thought he had enough power to make whatever decisions he liked. But he'd neither the experience nor the flair needed for that kind of responsibility.'

'That's your opinion.'

'It was also the opinion of your father's other top executives.'

'So because they acted as yes-men after you'd taken over, and agreed with you, you kept them and fired him.'

'It wasn't a case of *agreeing* with me,' Luke said evenly. 'Before I'd done any digging or made any judgement whatsoever, I talked to each of them individually. After all, the people on the spot are the ones who tend to know what's going on. Most of them, including Joe Preedy who's been with the bank over thirty years, thought Dawson was basically unsound.'

'So it meant you knew who to blame? Who to go gunning for?'

Refusing to be rattled, he told her calmly, 'It meant I knew where to start looking.'

'Why didn't Joe Preedy or the others say anything to my father?'

'I understand that Joe and at least one of the others tried, but William simply wouldn't listen, more's the pity. He put it down to politics and rivalry. I think he was blinded by old friendships and all the plans he'd made for the future.'

'Plans that *you* put an end to.'

'No, Jess.'

'Are you saying you're not to blame?'

'I'm saying the damage was done before I ever got involved, and the onus lies mainly on Dawson's shoulders. But your father's not totally free from responsibility. He was a fine man in many ways and I liked him, but to some extent he brought about his own downfall—'

'How *dare* you blame my father?' Jessica cried furiously.

His face like granite, Luke said, 'It's time you faced facts. If your father hadn't placed such trust in Dawson, a great deal of the damage could have been averted, but by the time I was called in it was too late. Dawson had sanctioned loans for what were patently unsound projects, then to cover up those disastrous mistakes he'd borrowed money he should never have touched, and gambled wildly on schemes that no one in their right mind would have looked at. In short, it amounted to fraudulent conversion, though he'd covered it up so cleverly that it took some uncovering.'

'If what you're saying is true, why didn't you hand Michael over to the police?'

'I didn't care to.'

'Why not?' she persisted.

'Because of your family's regard for him, I wanted to keep the whole thing quiet. I hoped that he'd learnt his lesson.'

Shaken, she began, 'But, surely, if it was fraud, unless the money was put back—'

'It was put back.'

'How?'

'I replaced it out of my own pocket,' Luke said flatly.

Jessica didn't want to believe what she was hearing. It was much easier to simply blame Luke for everything. But his words had carried an unmistakable ring of truth, and for the first time she found herself wondering if—as far as Doyles was concerned—she might have completely mis-judged him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As JESSICA gazed at Luke, her thoughts whirling, he said quietly, 'If you can't, or don't *want* to believe me, I have ample proof of Dawson's fraudulent activities. I'd planned to just sit on it, but against my will I was forced to show it to his father.'

'Show it to Tom? Why?'

'To stop him kicking up a fuss. He thought his son had been made a scapegoat, and he was threatening to take legal action. He's a decent man, and when he learnt the truth he was badly shaken.'

Yes, he would be. Tom cared about his son.

'It seems to have come as a shock to you, too...'

Shock was an understatement. She was devastated. All these years she'd been mistaken about both Luke and Michael—painting one as a monster and the other as an innocent victim.

'I—I don't know what to say,' she stammered. 'I'm sorry I misjudged you...sorry I was so wrong about everything.' Helplessly, she continued, 'That sounds totally inadequate. But I never dreamt that Michael—' Her voice broke and she stopped speaking abruptly.

'I suppose it must be unsettling to find your partner is capable of such dishonesty. You did say "partner"?"

Jessica swallowed hard. Having embarked on the lie, she was stuck with it. 'Yes, I did.'

'So do you actually live together?'

'I've told you—'

'I mean in the sense of sharing a house?'

She hesitated, then said, 'Yes, we live together.'

'Where do you live?'

'That's none of your business.' She was thankful that Foster Gilles never disclosed an employee's private address.

Watching his slight shrug, she was relieved that he'd accepted her refusal to tell him.

Then, like an unexpected rapier thrust, he struck. 'So what's Dawson doing now?'

Having cut herself off completely from her old life, she had no idea.

'Surely you *know* what he's doing?' Luke persisted.

'Going straight,' she answered shortly, and hoped it was the truth.

'Does that mean he's out of a job and you're supporting him?'

'No it doesn't...' Seeing Luke wasn't about to let go, and remembering what Michael had once told her, she said, 'He works for his brother-in-law who runs an export firm.'

'And you've no plans to marry? You're quite happy to remain Miss Fenton?'

'Quite happy.'

'What if you have children?'

'We don't intend to,' she said hurriedly.

Then, before he could pursue that line of questioning, hoping to get on to safer ground, Jessica picked up on an earlier thought. 'So when you were told that Foster Gilles were sending a Miss Fenton over for the seminar, you knew it was me.'

'There was a little more to it than that.'

'In what way?'

'I made *sure* it was you they sent.'

Her expression disbelieving, she asked, 'How did you do that?'

'I didn't want my name to come into it, so all the arrangements were put in hand by one of my top executives,

who happens to be a woman. She made it clear that Leroy have a policy of equal opportunities for women, and tended to favour a female analyst...'.

Yes, Jessica thought dazedly, she could remember Stamford Franklin saying as much.

'She's very pro-female so she made the point well, and as *you* were the only female analyst, it worked.' His voice held satisfaction.

'What if it hadn't?'

'I would have been forced to try a more direct approach.'

'Rather than give up?'

'My dear Jess, the whole thing was set up just to get you over here.'

All the colour drained from her face, and for maybe ten seconds, while she absorbed the shock, she simply sat and gaped at him.

When she could find her voice, afraid to ask the \$64,000 question, she went for what had suddenly become the less important aspect. 'Then you've no intention of doing business with Foster Gilles?'

'That depends.'

'On what?'

'On you. If I get your co-operation, I'll be happy to go ahead with the deal, If not...'

'What kind of co-operation?'

'Full.'

Losing her cool, Jessica cried, 'I wish you'd stop playing games with me and tell me exactly why you went to such lengths to get me here. What it is you want me to do.'

'I want you to marry me.'

'What?' Her eyes widened in disbelief.

Calmly Luke repeated, 'I want you to marry me.'

Agitation brought her to her feet. 'You must be mad! I told you once before that I wouldn't marry you if my life depended on it.'

'Well, your *life* may not, but your future certainly will.'

'If you think for one minute I'd marry you in order to save a business deal, you've another think coming!'

'Even if it results in you losing your job? Or maybe you don't need to work?'

'Of course I need to work!'

'What about your *partner*?' Luke queried mockingly. 'Won't he support you? Or is he perhaps just a figment of your imagination?'

'Damn you!' she muttered.

He smiled mirthlessly. 'You've not learnt to be a good liar, Jess. You're basically too honest.'

On her feet and facing him defiantly across the table, she took a deep, steadyng breath. 'I may not have learnt to be a good liar, but I *have* learnt how to stand up to pressure. As far as the deal goes, I won't be blackmailed. You can pull out as soon as you like and I'll go straight back to London. If I get fired—'

'There'll be no "if" about it. I'll make quite sure you do.'

'I can always find another position.'

'As good and well paid?'

'Yes.'

'I doubt it.' Quietly, without dramatics, he added, 'I wield enough power in financial circles to make it extremely unlikely, to say the least.'

Though Jessica's blood seemed to turn to ice, she fought back. 'You may have power, but you can't prevent me getting a job of some kind. I'll work in a shop, or as a waitress, if I have to.'

Conversationally, Luke asked, 'And rely on tips to pay for a Hampstead flat and a nanny for your daughter?'

All the blood seemed to drain from her head. Feeling faint, she swayed and would have fallen if Luke hadn't leapt to his feet and caught her.

Her eyes closed, her senses misty and whirling, she was vaguely aware of being lifted effortlessly and carried into the house.

Clinging to the coat-tails of consciousness, she was lowered onto a couch. A firm hand on the back of her neck gently pushed her head down to her knees and held it there.

Returning blood banishing the faintness, she said thickly, 'I'm all right now.'

As soon as the hand was removed, she made a valiant attempt to sit upright.

Studying her ashen face, Luke pulled a large cushion into place and said crisply, 'Lean your back against this and put your feet up.'

Jessica was helped into position and her legs lifted on to the couch.

A second or two later a glass was put into her nerveless fingers. 'Drink that,' he ordered.

She had started to shake, and was forced to hold the glass with both hands to keep it steady while she obediently sipped the brandy.

Gradually a little colour returned to her cheeks, and he observed, 'That's better.'

When the glass was empty he took it from her. Putting it down on a nearby table, he asked, 'How do you feel now?'

She felt as if the sky had fallen in on her, but somehow she answered, 'I'm quite all right, thank you. It must have been the heat.'

'So it had nothing to do with the fact that I not only know where you live, but I also know you have a daughter?'

Of course she should have been prepared, Jessica thought wearily. She knew that Luke never did anything by halves, and once he'd found her he would have had her followed home and the house watched.

When she failed to answer, he sat down by her legs and, watching her face, suggested, 'Suppose you tell me about the child?'

Reading her refusal in the way her soft mouth tightened, he pursued, 'For instance, whose is she?'

'Mine!' Jessica retorted fiercely.

'But presumably your daughter has a father? I'd like to know his name.'

When he got no response, he warned softly, 'I've every intention of knowing the truth, Jess, so you may as well tell me.'

A name sprang to mind from a book she'd recently been reading. 'All right, if you must know, her father's name is Paul Merchant.'

Just for an instant, Luke looked visibly shaken, and she hugged herself. Perhaps she wasn't such a bad liar after all.

'Then why are you living on your own, apart from a nanny, that is?'

'Paul's married.'

'I wouldn't have thought a married man was your style.'

'It was a short affair that ended when I discovered he had a wife.'

His eyes narrowing, Luke asked, 'What's he like?'

'Tall and dark and quite nice-looking. Stacy takes after him.' Catching her breath in a silent, horrified gasp, Jessica wished frantically that she'd kept quiet.

Luke, who never missed a trick, murmured, 'Stacy? That's a nice name. What's it short for?'

'It's not short for anything,' she denied quickly.

'Really? I thought it might be a pet form of Anastasia.'

Regretting the stupid sentimentality that had made her name her daughter as Luke would have wished, she said shortly, 'Well, it isn't.'

'So how old is Stacy?' he pursued smoothly.

Knowing her only faint hope was to convince Luke that

he couldn't possibly be the father, she lied, 'Two and a half.'

'She looks older.'

'How do you know she looks older?'

He rose to his feet and, while she watched him anxiously, took a large brown envelope from one of the bureau drawers. Resuming his seat on the couch, he passed it to her.

With shaking fingers she opened it. It contained a selection of photographs. Some were of herself and Stacy, others of Alice and Stacy, and one or two of Stacy on her own. All were clear, and excellent likenesses.

'Where did you get these?'

'My detective took them. Stacy is a lovely child, and big for her age. In fact, she looks more like three and a half, wouldn't you say?'

'She's always been tall.'

Slipping the photographs back into the envelope, he tossed it on to the bureau and shook his head. 'It's no use Jess. I know she was christened Anastasia, and I know she's mine. She even looks like me.'

Jessica sat quite still, as though turned to stone, her hands clasped tightly together so the knuckles shone ivory white.

'You must hate me very much to have deprived me of my own child,' Luke said quietly.

Feeling an unutterable despair, she whispered, 'I loved you once, until you gave me *cause* to hate you.'

'And vice versa.'

The words were like a knife thrust, and she flinched visibly.

'What have you told Stacy about her father?' His bitterness as searing as acid, he added, 'In the circumstances I believe the classic story one tells a child is that he's dead?'

'I—I haven't told her anything. She hasn't asked yet.'

'Good. It could be traumatic to have a father she believes

is dead suddenly turn up. Just out of curiosity, what were you planning to tell her when she did ask?'

'Only that her daddy had left us.'

'Not the other way around?'

'Well, I—'

'You'd have been quite happy to let her think her father didn't want her?'

'No, I wouldn't have been happy, but what else could I have done?'

He sighed. 'Oh, well, what you would or wouldn't have done is no longer relevant. Once we're married she'll have a mother and a father.'

'I don't want to marry you.' Her voice rose a shade. 'I won't marry you!'

'I'm afraid you have no option. Either you marry me or I'll take Stacy away from you.'

'No! You can't do that.'

'I think you'll find I can.'

If he'd shouted or blustered, somehow it would have seemed less of a threat, but his quiet certainty terrified Jessica.

'Please, Luke,' she found herself begging, 'I couldn't bear to lose her. She's all I've got.'

He was sitting so close that she could see the tiny laughter lines at the corners of his eyes and the scar on his chin where, as a child, he'd been struck by a stray airgun pellet.

'Then get this quite straight, Jess. No matter what lengths I have to go to, I intend to have my daughter. However, as a tug-of-love situation almost invariably hurts the child, I'd prefer not to have to go to court.'

'Even if you went to court, no judge would take a child away from its mother and give it to a father it had never seen.'

'Unless she was an unfit mother.'

Shocked, she cried, 'But I'm *not* an unfit mother.'

'I'm sure you're not,' he agreed smoothly. 'But if you make it necessary, I'll use every dirty trick in the book to make it *appear* that you are.'

Aghast, she whispered, 'Even you wouldn't go to those lengths.'

His grey eyes as cold as a winter sea, he invited, 'Go ahead and try me.'

In desperation, she suggested, 'Suppose I agree to let you see her whenever you want?'

'I'm afraid that's too little, too late. I want her with me on a permanent basis.'

'No! Oh, *please*, Luke, you can't do this. Being parted from Stacy would break my heart.'

His face like granite, he said, 'Why should I care about breaking your heart? You haven't cared about breaking mine...'

If she really *had* broken his heart, it was no wonder he hated her.

'But I don't want to hurt Stacy by depriving her of her mother. That's why I think it would make sense for us to marry.'

'What good is there in two people who hate each other getting married?'

'If we both keep our feelings under control and act in a civilized way, quite a lot. It would be better for Stacy. She wouldn't miss out on—'

'Stacy doesn't miss out on anything,' Jessica broke in sharply. 'She's a happy, well-balanced child—'

'An *only* child, a child who sees very little of her mother, a child who has to be left with a nanny when her mother goes away on business.'

Unable to deny the truth of that, she bit her lip.

'Wouldn't it be better for her to have both a father and a mother, brothers and sisters, a real family home... Pets if she wants them?'

The rider cut like a whiplash as Jessica recalled the Labrador puppy Stacy had pleaded for.

'You notice I haven't mentioned the financial aspect,' Luke went on, 'but that's important, too. You wouldn't need to work if you didn't want to, neither would you need to scrimp and save and count the pennies.'

Caught on the raw, she protested, 'I try to give Stacy everything she wants.'

'I'm sure you do, while *you* go short.'

As she began to shake her head in denial, he asked, 'When you've paid for the essentials how much have you got left to spend on yourself? Hardly anything is my guess.'

He changed position a little so that his thigh pressed against her calves. Feeling hemmed in, trapped, she inched her legs back as far as they would go.

'Your toiletries and the cosmetics you wear are cheap, and the dress and shoes you had on last night are several years out of date—'

'I didn't know you were so interested in fashion.'

'I'm not. I recognize them from the old days. When you're my wife you'll have money to—'

'What does money matter if I'm married to a man I—?' She bit off the rest of the sentence.

'Loathe?' he suggested wryly.

'I'd only be unhappy with.'

'I agree that money can't make up for being unhappy, but as you're going to be unhappy either way, you haven't a great deal to lose, and at least *something* to gain. You'll be with Stacy, have the kind of lifestyle most people would enjoy, and I know I can keep you satisfied in bed.'

Flushing a little, she told him, 'The only thing that really matters is being with Stacy.'

A bitter twist to his mouth, he said, 'Then look on the rest as compensation for being married to me.'

'What about you?' she asked curiously.

'You mean, what do I gain? Quite a lot. My daughter, to begin with, the chance to have other children, a beautiful, if unwilling, wife, a good sex life, companionship—at one time we enjoyed being together...'

'But that was before I—' She stopped abruptly.

'Before you got it into your head that Susan and I were lovers?'

'Why didn't you marry her?'

'There'd never been any question of marriage. We were old friends, nothing more, nothing less.'

Remembering how she'd found them in each other's arms, how Susan had *looked* at him, Jessica half shook her head.

'If we'd wanted to marry, we could have done so after the death of her first husband.'

Flatly, he added, 'Though I haven't lived like a monk, *you* are the only woman I've ever wanted to marry. I wanted to marry you then, and I still want to marry you, in spite of everything.'

He was much too close for comfort. Wishing he'd move away so she could get up, she asked, 'What about love?'

'Not everyone's lucky enough to have love in their lives, and even two people who don't love each other can live together in a rational manner and share a good, passionate sex life. Love and hate are both powerful emotions and very close, two sides of the same coin, and interchangeable. Ambivalence must be present at times in a lot of quite successful marriages. Indifference is the real killer. If either of us were indifferent, our marriage wouldn't work. But as we're not, it stands a good chance. That is if there's no one else you care about?'

For an instant she considered saying there was, then, knowing it wouldn't wash, she answered flatly, 'No, there's no one.'

His grey eyes studying her face, he said, 'Tell me, Jess, has there been anyone else since me?'

Knowing there would have been no shortage of women in his life, she said flippantly, 'Dozens.'

'The truth, Jess.'

'No. There's been no one else.'

She heard the breath hiss through Luke's teeth. 'Why not? You're a warm, passionate woman.'

'Let's say that, after making one disastrous mistake, I went off men.'

His mouth tightened. 'So you look on the whole thing as a disastrous mistake?'

'What else would you call it?' Swiftly she amended, 'No, I don't mean Stacy. Having her is the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me.'

'Why did you lie to me? Make me believe you'd lost the child?'

'Do you really need to ask?' she demanded fiercely.

'Well, even if you didn't want to marry me, you could have let me help financially. Having a baby alone can't have been easy.'

'It wasn't, but going it alone was vastly preferable to having you in my life.'

Luke seemed to pale beneath his tan. 'So you never once regretted your decision?'

About to say no, she hesitated and admitted, 'At times I felt guilty about depriving Stacy of a father...and you of a daughter.'

'Well, now you can put that right by marrying me and turning us into a family.'

But there was one aspect, she realized, that still hadn't been mentioned. If she agreed to this marriage, did he intend to stick to his wedding vows?

He was a red-blooded, charismatic man, who would always attract women like a magnet. Even so, if he'd been

marrying a woman he loved, she would have had few doubts about his fidelity. But the fact that he hated her, and only wanted to marry her because of Stacy, made things vastly different.

Would he feel free to have other women? Perhaps even flaunt them, to pay her back?

That would be unbearable, and she needed to know.

'What *kind* of marriage were you envisaging?'

'You mean, would there be other women?'

She nodded.

'No,' he answered firmly. 'I'm no Casanova. One woman is all I need.'

He took her hand. 'I want the good old-fashioned kind of marriage. The kind my grandparents had, where two people stay faithful to each other for life.'

Her head bent, she stared at their two hands, one golden, the other darkly tanned, and thought how wonderful that would be if it were possible.

'Think about it, Jess, then say, yes, you'll marry me.'

Just for an instant she was tempted. In some ways it would be a relief to give up the fight and agree. She wouldn't have to live with the fear of losing the child she loved; there would be no more financial problems; no more denying her natural needs...

Most important of all, Stacy would have a father, and there was absolutely no doubt in her mind that, whatever his faults, Luke would make a good father...

No, no, she must be mad to even consider it. Too much anger and resentment, too many doubts, too many bitter memories still existed for a marriage between them to stand any chance.

And how could she bear to marry a man she hated, and who hated her?

Though did she still hate Luke? A lot of that hatred had been engendered by what she'd thought he'd done to her

father and Michael. Now she had accepted that she'd been wrong in that respect, how drastically did it alter her feelings?

Once she had loved Luke deeply, until that love had turned to hate... Yet not totally... Mingled with the black hatred, hadn't there always been golden strands of love?

But no matter how she felt about Luke, it didn't alter the fact that *he* hated *her*. He'd admitted as much. She shivered. To the best of her knowledge, no one had ever hated her before.

Though he had every right to hate her, the chill voice of honesty pointed out. She had robbed him of his daughter, in addition to badly misjudging him...

She felt a deep sense of shame.

After a moment that shame was swamped by anger. She might have been wrong as far as the bank was concerned, but it didn't mean she'd been wrong about him having an affair with her stepmother.

Despite all his denials, Susan and he must have been lovers. Why else would she have been in his room, wrapped in his arms, clad only in a transparent negligee?

Jessica clenched her teeth. How often had she tried to drive the image from her mind, without success? She could never forget the past, never forget that while he had been making love to her he had been making a cuckold of her father.

So how could she marry Luke? No matter how hard she tried to make their marriage work, that memory would always come between them.

But what alternative did she have? His threat to take Stacy away from her was a very real one. He had money and power, and was ruthless enough to use both to achieve his goal.

It was one thing to tell herself that he wouldn't succeed,

but how could she be sure? And she couldn't risk losing her daughter.

Yet neither could she marry Luke.

She was caught between a rock and a hard place.

But there *must* be some means of escape...

Suppose she took Stacy and disappeared again? Perhaps moved up north, where it would be cheaper to live and Luke would never think of looking for her?

Alice had grown fond of her charge, and had once confided that she had 'a nice little nest egg put away for a rainy day', so she might be prepared to move with them and wait for her salary until her employer had found another job.

It *could* work. No, it *had* to work.

But to carry out a plan of that kind, Jessica thought feverishly, she would need time and space. She'd need to lull any suspicions on Luke's part, so he would call off his private detective.

The only way she could think of to gain time and space and Luke's trust was to agree to marry him...

'Well?' He was still holding her hand, his thumb circling the palm.

Lifting her head, she said clearly, 'Yes, I'll marry you.' She even managed to smile.

His face impassive, he asked, 'Then you're satisfied such a marriage will work?'

'I'm sure it will. It *has* to. I can't afford to lose Stacy.'

'In that case, we'll consider ourselves engaged.'

Releasing her hand, he got to his feet and crossed to the bureau once more.

With so much on her mind she was a bit slow off the mark, and before she could put her feet to the floor he had returned and resumed his seat.

'You've lost weight since I knew you, so this may be too big now.'

Like someone in a dream, she found herself staring down at the ring he'd slipped on to the third finger of her left hand.

Instead of the more conventional stones, nestling in an unusual stepped setting of gleaming gold were five perfectly matched sea-coloured opals.

It was lovely and romantic, and she felt the sharp prick of tears behind her eyes. If only things had been different. *If only...the saddest lament in the world.*

'I hope you like it.'

'It's beautiful,' she managed.

'I'd begun to give up hope of ever seeing you wear it.'

In answer to her questioning glance, he explained, 'It's a ring I bought over four years ago.'

'And you've kept it all this time?'

'I had it made specially for you...to match your eyes.'

Thrown, she sat like a statue staring down at it, until a hand lifted her chin and Luke queried, 'What about a kiss to seal the bargain?'

His face was only a few inches from hers, and with her heart suddenly beating madly she closed her eyes and waited for him to kiss her.

When he made no move, wondering what was wrong, she opened her eyes and looked at him.

'I thought *you* might kiss *me*,' he murmured ironically.

It should have been a simple matter to close that small gap and kiss him, yet it was the hardest thing she had ever had to do in her life.

Taking a deep breath, she leaned forward and lightly touched her mouth to his.

His lips were quiescent, and he made no move to deepen the kiss.

Disconcerted, without knowing precisely why, she drew back. Then, reminding herself that she had to convince him

of her intention to go ahead with the marriage, she asked boldly, 'I hope that's good enough to seal the bargain?'

Coolly, he answered, 'It wasn't exactly passion personified, but I'm sure it'll do.'

Wanting everything to sound completely decided, cut and dried, she asked, 'Where will you want us to live—after we're married, I mean?'

'That's up to you,' he answered evenly. 'I usually spend my weekends here, but if you've no objection to living in Manhattan during the week, I'd prefer you to be with me the whole time.'

'No, I've no objection to living in Manhattan. It sounds fun, and I'll be able to take Stacy for walks in Central Park and to the zoo.'

'If you don't like the penthouse for any reason, we'll buy a brownstone.'

'Oh, I'm sure I'll like the penthouse,' she assured him, 'so long as I don't have to clean the windows.'

He grinned briefly. 'Unless you actually look down there's no sensation of height, and if this present heatwave continues, you'll find the terrace can be beautifully cool.'

If this present heatwave continues...

No, he couldn't mean what she thought he meant. Telling herself to stay calm, she asked, 'Have you decided when you'd like the wedding to take place?'

'Tomorrow.'

Feeling as though her heart had stopped, she stammered, 'T-tomorrow? Surely you don't mean it?'

'Why not? You're on the spot and there's no reason to wait.'

'No! No, I can't possibly get married that soon. I thought maybe in a month or so.'

When he didn't answer she rushed on, 'There's an awful lot to do.'

'Such as?'

'Well, I—I'll need to tell Mr Franklin I'm leaving, and work at least a month's notice.'

'I'll take care of that,' Luke said. He added humorously, 'I'll tell him I'm more than happy for the deal to go ahead, so long as I can marry his favourite analyst immediately.'

'But it wouldn't be fair to just leave after all he's done for me!'

Seeing that argument wasn't cutting any ice, she pointed out, 'In any case, I'll need to talk to Stacy, to explain what's happening, so she can get used to the idea.'

'Children of that age are very adaptable. It's my belief that she'll take it in her stride.'

'And there's the flat... The rent's paid until the end of December.'

'I don't see that as a problem.'

'But I must have time to pack and move my belongings out.'

Looking unimpressed, he observed smoothly, 'I understood you rented a furnished flat.'

Luke's detective had done his work well, she thought bitterly. Aloud, she said, 'There's still personal things to be moved.'

'Why is it so imperative to move them before we're married if the rent's paid until the end of December?'

Having no ready answer, she changed tack. 'But apart from this dress, I've nothing with me except business clothes.'

'That doesn't matter. Whatever you need we can buy. If not today, then tomorrow. The ceremony isn't until eleven o'clock.'

Clutching at straws, she protested, 'But surely it isn't possible to be married at such short notice? Doesn't it take time to complete all the formalities, to get a licence and health checks done?'

'I already have a valid licence. In New York State any

couple can marry twenty-four hours after the licence has been granted, and no premarital examination or blood test is required. Added to that, the church is booked and all the arrangements have been made.'

'No,' she broke in desperately, 'You'll have to cancel it. I can't be rushed like this. I need to go back home. I need time.'

'To do what? Disappear again?'

CHAPTER EIGHT

WATCHING Jessica lose every vestige of colour, Luke remarked quietly, 'As I said before, you're not a very good liar, neither are you good at hiding your thoughts. It was quite obvious what you were planning, but it's not going to work, Jess. I've no intention of letting you out of my sight until I'm sure you won't run again.'

Pressing her fingers against her throbbing temples, she asked hoarsely, 'Suppose I give you my word I won't?'

His smile twisted, he asked grimly, 'Do you take me for a fool?'

'Please, give me a little time,' she pleaded. 'A few days at least...'

He shook his head.

Hounded into a corner, she turned at bay. 'Well, if you're determined to get married tomorrow you'll have to find yourself another bride, because I won't be there!'

Seeing he looked completely unmoved by her outburst, she cried, 'I mean it, damn you! I won't be coerced or frightened into doing something I don't want to do. As soon as I can get back to New York, I'm going home. I'll tell Mr Franklin the whole truth, and throw myself on his mercy.'

'I must say I enjoy a bit of melodrama,' Luke mocked.

Too angry to be afraid of the possible consequences, Jessica snapped, 'Then have a bit more!' Tearing his ring from her finger, she threw it across the room. Her returning hand gathering pace, she slapped him across the face as hard as she could.

The force of the blow jerked his head sideways and made

him blink. 'Well, well, well...' he murmured. 'Quite the little drama queen.'

Her palm stinging, she met and held his gaze. 'I hate and despite you,' she said quietly, 'and if you try to take Stacy away from me, I'll swear she isn't yours.'

'Have you never heard of DNA testing to establish fatherhood?'

'It can't be a hundred per cent certain, and I'll fight you every step of the way. Power and money don't count for everything. If you take me to court and try to blacken my character, Alice, and people like Tom Dawson who've known me all my life will stick up for me. Furthermore, I'll retaliate by telling them how you had an affair with my stepmother while you were a guest in my father's house...'

'Bravo!' Luke applauded. 'Though the latter isn't true, I'm forced to admire your fighting spirit.'

'You can keep your admiration,' she said curtly. 'All I want from you is your agreement to let me leave as soon as possible.'

'We haven't finished our talk.'

'So far as I'm concerned, there's nothing more to be said, and I've no intention of sitting here any longer. Please, let me get up.'

Rising to his feet, he extended his hand.

Studiously ignoring it, Jessica swung her legs to the floor and stood up a little awkwardly, her muscles protesting at being cramped in the same position too long.

'Stiff?' he queried. 'What about taking a walk in the garden?'

'I'd prefer it if you would make arrangements for me to go back to town.'

Quietly adamant, he told her, 'If you still insist on leaving when we've finished our talk, I'll be happy to take you to the airport myself.'

She bit her lip, wanting to argue, to repeat that there was

nothing more to be said, but well aware that she would be wasting her breath.

Though he hadn't made a point of it, it was galling to know that he held the whip hand, that she couldn't very well leave Bear Lodge without his say-so.

Crossing the room, he retrieved the ring and dropped it into his pocket, as though the beautiful thing was no longer of any account.

'I had it made specially for you...to match your eyes.'

Jessica felt a sudden sharp stab of pain.

'Something wrong?'

'No.'

'Then let's take that walk... We may as well go this way.'

A hand at her waist, Luke led her out through a door at the far side of the living-room and across a paved area warm with sunshine.

She was wearing low-heeled sandals, and he seemed to tower over her. Five feet seven herself, it always came as a surprise just how tall Luke was. Yet, unlike a lot of tall men, he was lithe and graceful, his movements perfectly co-ordinated.

A flight of stone steps wound down to one of the terraced gardens, and they descended together, matching step for step as though they were in a three-legged race.

In the past they had sometimes done the same and laughed about it.

Involuntarily, she glanced up, wondering if he remembered.

His left cheek bore an angry red mark, and beneath his eye, where the thick sweep of dark lashes drooped, it was starting to look discoloured and puffy.

Jessica realized that the ring her father had bought her for her twenty-first birthday—and which she'd worn ever

since on the middle finger of her right hand—must have caught his cheekbone.

Disconcerted, she missed the last step and stumbled.

He caught her arm and steadied her as they began to stroll between borders bright with autumn flowers to a kind of belvedere, where they paused to lean on the warm stone wall and look at the view.

But blind to the picturesque scene, all Jessica could see in her mind's eye was the fiery handprint on the tanned skin, and without conscious volition her eyes were drawn to his face once more.

He turned his head and caught her looking.

'Yes...' Touching his cheekbone gingerly, he added with wry humour, 'I must say that for a normally inoffensive woman who hates violence, you pack a pretty good wallop. I'm not sure I won't have a black eye by tomorrow.'

A reluctant sense of shame made her aggressive. 'Well, if you think I'm going to apologize—'

'I'm not asking for an apology. In fact, now you've got your dander up I feel a lot better about the whole thing. It makes the fight more equal, and a great deal more entertaining.'

'*Entertaining!*' Her voice rose half an octave. 'You've manipulated me, threatened me, tried to coerce me, and you call it *entertaining*!'

Though Luke forbore to smile, from the gleam in his eye she realized he'd been baiting her. 'Swine!' she muttered.

'That's hardly the way a nicely brought-up young woman should talk to her fiancé,' he said reprovingly.

'You're *not* my fiancé,' she retorted sharply. Then, realizing she was falling for it again, she added in the kind of mocking tone he'd used, 'If you recall, I've just broken it off.'

'Dear me, if I believed you really meant it, that would make our engagement the shortest on record.'

'Believe it.'

Jessica felt a sudden sense of freedom, almost elation. She'd taken Luke on and won the first battle, if not the war.

Shaking his head, he said soothingly, 'Let's put the whole thing down to pre-wedding nerves. I understand that most brides get the jitters, and if anyone asks it would explain why I'm going to the altar looking like a battered bridegroom.'

She took a deep breath, and said clearly, 'If you're still intending to go to the altar, *deserted* might be a more fitting adjective than battered.'

'But I won't be deserted,' Luke said calmly.

Her throat going dry, she demanded, 'What do you mean?'

'I mean that I've laid my plans too well for them to go wrong now.'

'Will you stop playing games with me,' she choked, 'and tell me exactly what you mean?'

'I mean that, despite the recent firework display, nothing's actually changed. We'll be getting married tomorrow as planned.'

'Over my dead body.'

'Oh, I think you'll come to see it my way.'

He spoke lightly and his expression was bland, unthreatening, yet he sounded so sure of himself that she felt a return of her previous apprehension.

Trying to still the flutter of alarm, she gathered her composure and asked, 'These *plans* you were talking about, are they something new?'

'No, merely an extension of the earlier ones. I put them into place as an additional safeguard, like an ace up the sleeve, so to speak. Ready to continue our stroll?'

Taking her hand, he tucked it casually through his arm, and when she would have withdrawn it he held it there.

Although his grip was light it was inflexible, and his

sideways glance warned her that he intended to have his way.

Guessing there were more important and disturbing issues to worry about, she let her hand stay where it was, and prompted, 'You were saying something about an ace up the sleeve?'

'Yes. Though in a lot of ways you seem pliable, I've always felt certain that you had strength, an inner core of steel. I didn't expect you to give in easily, and you've proved me right...'

Unsure what to make of his words or his reasonable tone, she waited.

'So now I need to play my ace.' He smiled as though he was making a joke, but in spite of that she suddenly felt chilled.

His eyes on her delicate heart-shaped face, he queried, 'You remember Paula Sutton?'

Flustered by the abrupt change of subject, she echoed, 'Paula Sutton?'

'Stacy's ex-nanny. The one who left about two months ago.'

'Of course I remember her,' Jessica said. 'But what's Paula got to do with it? And how do you know anything about her?'

'Because she was Stacy's nanny I made it my business to find out all about her.'

'Then you knew where we were living as long as two months ago?'

'I've known for almost three.'

When Jessica had recovered from the shock, she asked, 'Why didn't you make a move sooner?'

'I've been taking it slowly, planning ahead, trying to make sure everything would go without a hitch. I saw the seminar as the perfect opportunity to get you over here.'

'You left it very late.'

'The surprise element is a valuable one and I couldn't afford to waste it, so I waited until the very last minute to approach Foster Gilles. I didn't want you to have time to dig too deeply into who owned Leroy and suchlike... Anyway, to get back to Miss Sutton. You wanted to know what she had to do with it. Well, the answer is quite a lot really, though in a negative way.'

With a nasty feeling that she wasn't going to like what was coming, Jessica said jerkily, 'Would you, please, stop beating about the bush and get on with it?'

'If that's what you'd prefer.' Luke's little smile told her he'd intended to rattle her. 'Miss Sutton' left quite suddenly?'

'Yes, she told me on the Wednesday she was going, and actually left on the Friday.'

'Did she tell you why she wanted to leave?'

'She said she'd been offered a good job in the States, and her new employer was willing to pay her air fare if she could go straight away.'

'That's quite true. One of my executives was looking for an English nanny, and Miss Sutton's references were excellent, so I arranged to have her flown over.'

'*You* did? Why?'

'I had someone I wanted to put in her place.'

Stopping in her tracks, Jessica swung to face him. 'You can't mean *Alice*?'

But his expression left her in no doubt that he *did* mean Alice.

'No, I don't believe it! Alice would never...' Yet in a frightening way, it was starting to fit. Alice, newly over from the States, had answered her advertisement as soon as it had appeared. Almost as if she had been *waiting* to answer it...

'What if I hadn't advertised for a nanny?' Jessica spoke the thought aloud.

'It was odds on that you would. If by any chance you hadn't, Alice would have approached you directly.'

'How was she supposed to know I needed a nanny?'

'While she was looking for a permanent position, she was helping out at Stacy's playschool. There she got into conversation with Paula Sutton, who mentioned that she would be leaving the following day, and that you would be looking for a new nanny.'

'Who thought up that pack of lies?'

With a little crooked smile, Luke said, 'It happens to be largely the truth. I try and cover every angle without resorting to too many lies.'

'How many lies did Alice tell me?'

'As few as possible. Everything she told you was quite true, except the part about wanting to live in England. She's actually quite happy in New York.'

His eyes on Jessica's expressive face, he said, 'Alice is a friend of Annie's; and a very nice person. She's been a nanny all her life and is genuinely fond of children.'

'No wonder you said you knew a great deal about me,' Jessica burst out. 'You were bound to, with a spy planted in my own home to keep you informed about every little detail. You know, it's funny, but I actually *liked* her,' she added bitterly.

'Don't blame Alice,' he said seriously. 'She only took the job as an errand of mercy to help reunite a family.'

'What did you tell her to make her believe that?'

'The truth. That I'd wanted to marry you over four years ago, that you'd mistakenly blamed me for betraying both yourself and your father and vanished without learning the truth, that I'd been looking for you ever since, and that I wanted both you and my daughter back in my life. Alice is very down-to-earth. She asked why, having finally found you, I couldn't just approach you in person and tell you everything I wanted you to know.'

'And what did you say to that?'

'I told her you'd been so bitter, so prejudiced, it was very unlikely you would listen to me, that I needed to get you in a position where you'd be forced to listen. Because Annie had known me for so long and was happy to give me a good character reference, Alice agreed to help.'

Still shaken to think that the woman she'd trusted had betrayed that trust, Jessica said stonily, 'Well, I'm sure, from your point of view, she's done an excellent job. As soon as I reach home I'll be happy to send her straight back to New York so you can tell her so, and congratulate her. Now, I'd like to get home to my daughter as soon as possible... So, if you wouldn't mind?'

When he just stood and looked at her, she reminded him, 'You said you would take me to the airport when we'd finished our talk.'

'Ah, but we haven't finished.'

'Then would you mind getting to the point?'

'The point is, there's no point in going home.'

Angered by his flippancy, the way Luke kept playing with her, she demanded, 'Why is there no point in going home?'

'Stacy won't be there.'

That was the last thing she'd expected, and she said blankly, 'Of course she'll be there. Where else would she be?'

He said nothing, merely waited, his eyes narrowed against the sun.

It took a moment or two for the realization to sink in, and when it did every nerve in Jessica's body tightened and a rush of adrenaline made her heart start to race.

Through stiff lips, she said, 'I presume this is the ace you were talking about?'

'That's right. But you've no need to worry. Stacy is quite

safe and, no doubt, having lots of fun. Alice will take good care of her, I promise you.'

Striving to keep the panic out of her voice, Jessica demanded, 'Where is she?'

'I'll tell you that tomorrow, after we're married.'

For a few seconds Jessica ran the gamut of emotions from despair to futile anger then, her brain working furiously, she said, 'How do I know this isn't just a trick?'

'You could always phone home and check.'

'I will.'

He was bluffing. They would be home. They *had* to be. Alice might have agreed to spy for Luke, but surely she would never be a party to what amounted to kidnapping?

Turning, Jessica hurried blindly towards the house. Luke caught her up and put an arm around her waist as they ascended the steps.

As soon as they reached the living-room she went over to the phone and, picking up the receiver, tapped in the international code and her home number.

Taking into account the time difference, it would be early evening in London and Stacy would be in bed, so Alice was in all probability sitting looking at television.

Though it rang for what should have been plenty of time, there was no answer.

Waiting on pins, she wondered feverishly if they might be still out at the party Stacy had mentioned. Though, given the age group, that was rather unlikely.

So why weren't they home?

In desperation, she listened to the ringing tone.

'No answer?' Luke queried blandly.

Ignoring the hint of triumph in his voice, she tried to tell herself there might be some relatively innocent explanation for them not being at home.

But then, like a death knell to her hopes, she recalled her

daughter's voice saying. 'Guess what else we're going to do that's even *more* exciting...'

And in the background, Alice warning hastily, 'Weren't we going to keep that a secret so we could surprise Mummy?'

Dropping the receiver onto its cradle, Jessica covered her face with her hands and, completely overwrought, burst into tears.

All through the bad times—Luke's betrayal, her father's death, struggling to manage alone after Stacy's birth—she had never once cried, never once found the relief of tears.

Now she sobbed bitterly, distractedly, like a child, as if all the pent-up emotion was finally pouring out.

Luke's arms went around her and, gathering her close, he sank down on the nearest chair and pulled her onto his lap.

Making no attempt to halt the flood of tears, he simply held her until she'd cried herself out and the sobs were replaced by sniffles and hiccups. Reaching in his pocket, he produced a folded hankie, which he put into her hand.

'Don't worry about Stacy. Believe me, I wouldn't let any harm come to her.'

She believed him.

'Everything will work out fine, you'll see.'

Remembering that Alice had said much the same thing, Jessica blew her nose and scrubbed at her eyes. Then, feeling totally empty, drained, all the fight gone out of her, she sat listlessly staring into space, the hankie in her hand.

A finger beneath her chin, he turned her face to his. It was blotchy and ravaged, eyelids swollen, nose red and shiny.

With an attempt at humour she said huskily, 'I know what I must look like. I never could cry prettily, like a heroine in a novel. Even my mother used to say I was ugly when I cried.'

He kissed her wet cheek with a look in his grey eyes that could have been mistaken for tenderness. 'I'm afraid I can't agree with your mother.'

Standing up, he set her on her feet. 'Now, go and repair the damage and we'll get started.'

'Where are we going?'

'To Manhattan. I've no intention of letting you sit here and brood, so we'll use the time to do some shopping.'

'But it's Sunday afternoon.'

'Kay won't mind that. She's been standing by, so all I need to do is let her know we're coming.'

'Who's Kay?'

'A friend of mine who has a small boutique in the Irton Tower. Off you go.' He gave her a little push.

Moving like a sleepwalker, Jessica climbed the stairs to do his bidding. She felt curiously detached, almost peaceful, like someone who had fought a long hard battle and, weary to death, found it a relief to give up the struggle.

When she'd washed her face and bathed her eyes with cold water, she applied make-up carefully to hide the last traces of tears. Then, having put the cosmetics in her bag, she sprayed herself with Carissima, picked up a short jacket and went down again.

Luke was waiting. His eyes travelled over her face, noting the make-up, but he made no comment. He'd changed into a smart lightweight suit and a matching shirt and tie, and looked coolly elegant.

Realizing how out of keeping her casual dress and sandals were, she asked a shade awkwardly, 'Would you like me to change into a suit?'

He shook his head. 'You'll do fine as you are. Though I prefer you with your hair down.'

Without a word, she raised her hands to take out the pins.

'Let me.' He removed them deftly, sending the silky mass tumbling round her shoulders. Just for a moment he

buried his face in it then, straightening, he felt in his pocket.
'And I'd like you to wear this.'

Taking her left hand, he slipped the ring back into place and asked, 'Ready to get going?'

The practical side of her remembering the table on the patio, the open glass panels and the absence of staff, she asked, 'Can we just walk out like this?'

'I've given Jose a call. She'll come in and take care of everything. Now, it's almost four—' as though it had been waiting for its cue, the cuckoo clock whirred and announced the hour with great self-importance '—so John should have the chopper ready and waiting.'

When she glanced at him, he said matter-of-factly, 'It's a lot quicker this way. Have you ever been in a helicopter before?'

She shook her head.

Reading her expression aright, he promised, 'If you're scared, I'll hold your hand.'

As soon as they got out of doors she could hear the roar of an engine and the mechanical clatter of rotor blades.

Luke led her up a flight of steps at the far side of the house to a flat, treeless area where a small helicopter stood in the middle of a pad, its rotor blades turning, its door open.

'If for any reason I don't want to fly it myself, John doubles as a pilot as well as a security guard. He's the one who usually takes Annie into town,' Luke added as, a hand at Jessica's waist, he hurried her across to the blue and silver machine.

The noise was ear-splitting and the downdraught from the blades flattened her dress against her body and whipped her hair across her face.

But if Annie could take it in her stride, so could she, Jessica thought as she ducked her head and climbed in.

With the familiarity of long use, Luke got in beside her and reached to fasten both their seat belts.

Sitting at the controls, a burly, middle-aged man wearing earphones put a hand to his forehead in a laconic salute.

Luke gave him the thumbs-up sign, the engine note rose in pitch and a moment later they were lifting off into the blue sky.

To Jessica it felt like being encased in a plastic bubble and with her heart in her mouth she couldn't bring herself to look down, even though she knew the view must be fantastic.

Luke took her hand and gave it a squeeze. 'OK?'

Unable to speak, she nodded and fixed her gaze on the instrument panel.

Keeping his promise, he held her hand during the blessedly short flight and their landing on the helicopter pad on top of the Irton Tower.

After a brief, shouted word with John, he opened the door and, having helped Jessica out, hurried her towards the penthouse entrance.

Before they reached it, the blue and silver machine had lifted off once more and was disappearing over the rooftops.

'How was your first helicopter flight?' Luke asked, as he led the way into a spacious hall.

'Better than I'd expected,' she admitted.

'Would you do it again?'

She nodded and, remembering Annie, who apparently flew regularly, added, 'I may even conquer my fear of heights at last and get to enjoy it.'

'That's my girl. Now, Kay will be expecting us any minute, so we'd better go straight down.'

They took the private lift down more floors than Jessica cared to count to the residents' marble-slabbed, chandelier-hung lobby. From there they made their way to the main

foyer, which was lined with elegant boutiques, restaurants and art galleries.

A petite, well-dressed woman with short red-gold hair met them at the door of Chic. 'How nice to see you.' Her smile including them both, she ushered them inside.

Luke had accurately described the boutique as small, but it was nothing short of palatial, with a grey carpet, as thick and soft as smoke to walk on, lilac velvet hangings and brocade-covered chairs.

There were top-designer displays of everything from wedding gowns to shoes and accessories, and not a price tag in sight.

The redhead turned to Luke and, studying the purple discolouration above his cheekbone, asked drily, 'So how many rounds did it go?'

He laughed. 'Only one, and the door won.'

An arm around Jessica's slim waist, he introduced the two women. 'Jess, darling, I'd like you to meet Kay Madison, an old friend. Kay, this is my fiancée, Jessica Fenton.'

They smiled at each other and shook hands.

Kay Madison was somewhere in her late forties, alert and pleasant-looking, with an unexpected dimple and shrewd blue eyes.

'I understand that you're getting married tomorrow and need a complete trousseau?' If she thought it strange that a bride should leave everything until the last minute, she hid it well. 'What did you have in mind for the wedding itself? A dress, or a suit?'

'Well, I—'

'A dress,' Luke answered firmly. 'Something like that.' He indicated an ivory dress in wild silk, with a scooped neckline, long sleeves and a smooth sweep of skirt. It was perfectly plain, relying on the cut and the beauty of the material for its impact.

'You always did have good taste,' Kay remarked, making Jessica wonder how many other women he'd bought clothes for. 'That's a Dion Rhodes. She's not too well known at the moment, but in a year or so she'll be one of New York's top designers.'

Having assessed Jessica's slender figure, she said 'It should be just your size if you'd like to try it on.'

Gathering up the dress, she led the way to a curtained-off fitting room.

Slipping over her head with soft rustle, it fitted as though it had been made for her, and somehow the sight of herself wearing it took Jessica's breath away.

'What do you think?' Kay queried.

'It's lovely,' Jessica answered huskily.

Kay nodded, well pleased. 'You won't want to let Luke see you in it before the ceremony, it's supposed to be unlucky, so if you wait here I'll get the accessories.'

For the next hour, while Luke sat in one of the gilt-backed chairs and watched, a trousseau that many a new bride might have envied was assembled—clothes and underclothes, evening wear and nightwear, shoes and accessories.

'There, I think we've covered everything,' Kay said, satisfied at last. 'Give me twenty minutes and I'll have them all packed and sent up to you.'

Grateful for her friendly and unstinting help, Jessica thanked her warmly.

When Luke had added his thanks, and had made out a cheque for what Jessica felt sure must be an astronomical amount, they took the lift back up to the penthouse.

'You must be getting hungry,' he remarked, as the doors slid open and they emerged into the hall. 'I'll take you out for a meal when we've showered and changed. But first, so you feel at home, I'd better show you around.'

He'd said that same thing to her the night they'd become

lovers, she recalled, and with a strange feeling of *déjà vu* she followed him as he moved from room to room, opening doors.

As Jessica might have expected, this place bore no resemblance to the cramped and functional service flat he'd had then. The penthouse, which had a quiet, empty feel to it, covered the whole of the top floor and was frankly luxurious, with ivory and gold designer decor.

'This self-contained flat is where George and Rosemary Carter live,' Luke told her. 'They're friends of Annie's and, like her, I inherited them from my grandparents. Though George is wheelchair-bound, with a bit of outside help they manage to run the whole apartment.'

Listening to the silence, she said, 'But they're not here now?'

'Would you believe it's their day off? They're visiting their grandchildren who live in Brooklyn.'

Opening a door into a large, sunny room that overlooked one of the areas of roof-garden, Luke suggested casually, 'I thought this would make a good nursery-cum-playroom when Stacy joins us. The room on the other side is big enough to make a comfortable bedsit and would be ideal for a nanny—if you wanted one, that is. But we can discuss things like that later.'

'And this will be our bedroom...'

The master bedroom had a bathroom at each end and adjoined an attractive living-room, the French windows of which gave onto a paved terrace and a green and pleasant roof-garden.

Opening the windows wide, he remarked, 'No doubt it's my English roots, but even in a heatwave I prefer air to air-conditioning.'

From the terrace there were wonderful views over Central Park to the skyscrapers on the West Side, glass

pinnacles that gleamed in the sun and reflected shapes and colours like magic towers in a fairy-tale.

'In its own way this is as beautiful as the country,' Jessica said quietly.

'Then you'll be happy living here with me during the week?'

All at once the tension was back.

If she'd been able to forgive and forget the past, she could have been happy living in a mud hut with Luke. But as she could neither forget nor condone his affair with her stepmother—or the way he'd blackmailed her into this wedding—any chance of happiness seemed to be pretty remote. Not to say impossible.

Watching her face cloud over, Luke said wryly, 'Perhaps "happy" wasn't the right word.'

'No, it wasn't. What chance of happiness could there possibly be in a forced marriage?'

He sighed and, changing the subject, asked, 'Is there anywhere special you'd like to have dinner?'

'Not really. I'll leave it to you.'

'Then I suggest Benny's, which is as spectacular as Sky Windows, though not as big, and definitely not as high. It's only a couple of blocks away, so we can walk there and back, if that suits you?'

'Yes, it suits me fine.' A shade hesitantly, she asked, 'Will we be staying here tonight?'

'As the wedding is to take place in town it makes more sense than going back to Bear Lodge.'

Watching her face, he added wryly, 'There are several guest rooms if you prefer to sleep alone until we're married.'

Grasping the nettle, she asked, 'Where exactly are we being married?'

'At the Church of St Paul the Apostle. It's only a stone's throw from here.'

Jessica was startled. She had expected some kind of civil ceremony, rather than a church wedding.

'You don't look very pleased,' Luke commented evenly. Jessica shrugged. 'I suppose it doesn't really matter.'

But somehow it did. Being married in a church seemed to make the whole thing so much more solemn and binding, harder to put aside. And no matter what Luke had said about it being for life, a marriage like theirs had little chance of lasting.

As though reading her thoughts, he said, 'Though the circumstances are far from ideal, if we both try, I'm sure that for our daughter's sake we can make a go of it.'

When she made no answer, he lifted her chin so she was forced to look into his face and said quietly, 'I'm willing to try. What about you?'

'Suppose I say I'm not?'

'I very much hope you won't say that.' He smiled at her. 'After all, we may even get to like each other again.'

CHAPTER NINE

FOR an instant Luke's words took Jessica's breath away. She had always thought that liking was in some respects even more important than loving.

You could love someone who had cheated and let you down, but it was almost impossible to like them. Perhaps *love* was given freely, without qualifications, but *liking* signified approval and had to be earned.

At one time she had thought that what she felt for Luke encompassed both emotions. Now, only love remained.

And she did love him. She had never stopped loving him. Love would have to be enough.

'I doubt it,' she said flatly.

She saw a flicker of what might have been pain in the silvery eyes, and his hand dropped to his side.

Sounding cool and businesslike now, he suggested, 'What if I book a table at Benny's for eight-fifteen? That should give us ample time to shower, or even take a leisurely bath.'

She nodded her assent. Crossing to the master bedroom, he opened the right-hand bathroom door. 'You'll find everything you need in here, if you want to go ahead...'

The ivory and aquamarine bathroom was huge and luxurious. Jessica had been thinking of a shower until she saw the sunken bath, which looked as if it had come from some film set.

It was made of marble, and oval in shape; a plinth ran round the edge supporting a slender column every couple of feet. At the top, the columns were linked by trailing vines.

The sheer sensuality of its design and its air of sybaritic luxury made it impossible to resist.

At one end a small control panel had a temperature setting and 'fill' and 'empty' buttons.

Setting the temperature to what she judged would be pleasantly warm, she pressed the 'fill' button. Little jets coming from all sides filled it quickly and silently and kept the water gently moving.

It came as no surprise to find a cabinet well stocked with Carissima toiletries. Feeling suddenly reckless, she added bath essence with a generous hand, before taking off her clothes and walking down the two steps.

A combination of bath and Jacuzzi, it was even more sensual than it looked, with a padded bottom and sides and a convenient backrest.

Stretched out luxuriously, her eyes closed, the scented water with its rainbow bubbles lapping round her breasts, she gave herself up to sheer physical pleasure.

But while Jessica's body relaxed and enjoyed itself, her mind stubbornly refused to co-operate. Something kept nagging at her, a tenuous but persistent feeling of unease which she finally pinned down as shame.

Shame that she had refused the olive branch Luke had extended. Now he'd forced her hand, for everyone's sake she ought to let go of the past and make what she could of their future together...

There was a tap, and the bathroom door suddenly opened, making her jerk upright.

'Sorry, did I startle you?' Luke was wearing a short towelling robe and carrying a bottle of champagne and two glasses. 'Everything's fixed and your trousseau has arrived.'

He set the glasses on the marble-topped vanity unit and, easing the cork from the bottle with a slight pop, poured the smoking wine.

Sitting on the foot-high plinth, he passed her a glass. 'I thought before I went to shower a spot of decadence might not go amiss.'

Feeling absurdly shy, Jessica said, 'It's certainly the right setting for it.'

He grinned. 'Somewhat over the top, I've always thought. The previous owner had it put in for his wife.'

For a little while she sipped the perfectly chilled champagne in silence then, her conscience still niggling, she blurted out, 'I'm sorry...'

Raising dark brows, he queried, 'For what?'

'For not accepting the olive branch.'

'It's not too late.'

'And I'm sorry about your face.'

'It is unfortunate,' he agreed solemnly, 'but, then, film-star good looks aren't everything.'

She gave a little choke of laughter. 'You know perfectly well I meant your bruised cheek...' Seeing where his eyes were fixed, her voice tailed off.

His gaze lingering on her breasts, he said, 'I know one thing, seeing you there, like Venus rising from the foam, is having a devastating effect on me. At this rate I'll need to take a cold shower.'

Without intending to, she found herself asking, 'Wouldn't a warm bath be nicer?'

'Don't tell me that's an invitation?' he murmured ironically.

Flushing a little, she countered, 'Don't tell me you need one.'

'I thought you would prefer to wait until we're married.'

'Would you?'

Shaking his head, he said decidedly, 'I've waited long enough.'

Stripping off his robe, he joined her and reached for his

champagne. They drank, looking into each other's eyes. Then, leaning forward, he gently touched his lips to hers.

Though it was a lightest of caresses, Jessica felt the tingle right down to her toes.

Luke took the empty glass from her hand and placed it on the plinth. She leaned back, and he followed, bending to kiss her throat.

She gave a soft murmur.

Slipping a hand beneath her head, he raised it a little and held his own glass to her lips so she could drain it before he put it aside.

The intimacy was overwhelming, and she closed her eyes, her nipples growing firm without him even touching them.

'Look at me.'

Jessica opened her eyes. Smiling into them, he began to fondle her wet breasts, gently teasing the rosy peaks. Shuddering, her breath coming fast, she pulled him to her, whispering, 'Please, please...'

With a sound like a groan he covered her body with his and made them one.

For what seemed an age they both stayed perfectly still, as if any motion might destroy the intense feeling flowing between them.

Then slowly and with great care he began to move rhythmically, creating simultaneously a corresponding wave of water and a rising wave of rapture.

Experiencing the most complete ecstasy, she cried out his name, and he covered her mouth with his.

When the universe righted itself, she was lying in the crook of his arm, her head on his shoulder.

Utterly content, she could have remained that way for ever but, tenderly brushing the long strands of wet hair from her face, he said with a sigh, 'It's time we were making a move.'

'Do we have to go just yet?' she asked.

Kissing the corner of her mouth, he answered, 'Benny has promised to save us a table. He'll never forgive me if we're late.'

Luke sat up, taking Jessica with him, and kissed her again, murmuring regretfully, 'I'd like to dry you, but if I do we'll never get out.'

As he vacated the bath she watched him, admiring once again his splendid physique. She had expected him to don the bathrobe once more, but instead he headed naked for the shower stall.

'Surely you don't *still* need a cold shower?'

'Not a cold one.'

'I don't know why you need one at all.'

He grinned at her over his shoulder. 'While I love the scent of Carissima on you, I could do with smelling a little more masculine.'

When Luke had showered and disappeared into the bedroom, snatching a kiss *en route*, she finished blow-drying her hair. Unwilling to put the same undies back on, she donned a spare robe and went through to the living-room.

Piled on one of the couches was a stack of stylish grey boxes with lilac bows. Opening them, she took out some gossamer undies, silk stockings, high-heeled sandals and a matching evening purse.

She was trying to decide which of the dresses to put on when Luke appeared, looking irresistibly handsome in an evening jacket and black bow-tie.

'What shall I wear?' she asked, smiling at him, the glow of his love-making still lingering.

Selecting a cyan-coloured silk sheath with a matching stole, he said without hesitation, 'That one. It reminds me a little of your mermaid dress.'

Any mention of the past usually conjured up painful rec-

ollections, but now all she could feel was pleasure that he had remembered.

Gathering up the evening's finery, she asked, 'Which bedroom shall I use?'

'Mine, of course. Or should I say *ours*... If you'd like to unpack the rest of your things, there's just about time...' Picking up the pile of boxes, he followed her through and put them on the bed.

There were two wall-length, walk-in wardrobes with built-in drawers. One was obviously Luke's, the other was empty.

As she put away her trousseau and hung up her wedding dress, she thought with a surge of gladness that things really were going to be all right. Perhaps, in spite of everything, they *could* get to like each other again.

When Jessica was dressed and ready, lightly made up and her hair loose around her shoulders, she went back to the living-room.

His grey eyes travelling over her from head to toe, Luke took her hand and raised it to his lips. 'You look absolutely radiant. Like a woman who's just been made love to.'

They took the lift down, and walked through the residents' private lobby to the exit. To any onlookers, they must have seemed a good-looking, well-dressed, sophisticated pair.

But they walked hand in hand like two teenagers, and stole a kiss as they reached the door that led onto 5th Avenue.

By night that famous avenue was alive and vibrant, visually stunning, and with an ambience that was breathtaking.

It perfectly suited Jessica's euphoric mood, and as they strolled along in the warm evening air she sighed, totally enchanted by the noise and bustle, the glittering magic of Manhattan.

Hearing her sigh, Luke asked, 'What does that mean?' 'It means I'm happy,' she answered. And meant it.

He squeezed her hand. 'That's more than I'd dared hope for when I rang Benny's.'

'Tell me about Benny's. I've no idea what to expect.'

'It's rated as one of New York's most glamorous and prestigious nightspots. To get a table there one needs to be visiting royalty, a millionaire, the cream of society or a friend of Benny Diomedes...'

Judging by the fact that they were warmly welcomed at the arched entrance to the dining-room by Benny himself, it seemed that Luke came into all but the first category.

The two men shook hands with great cordiality, then Luke made the introduction.

Benny, a silver-haired man with the build of a heavyweight boxer and an olive skin that emphasized his Mediterranean origins, bowed over Jessica's hand with outmoded courtesy. 'Miss Fenton. How very nice to meet you.' He turned to Luke. 'I hear congratulations are in order?'

Looking a little surprised, Luke said, 'They are, indeed.'

Benny chuckled. 'Bet I'm the only one in town who knows... You're wondering *how* I know?' His face was a mobile one and he gesticulated as he talked. 'The priest at St Paul's happens to be a good friend of mine. We were discussing the funding for various charities and your name came up...'

The heavy glass doors that led into the foyer opened, and a contender for the White House, his wife on his arm and accompanied by a small party of guests and aides, came in.

'If you'll excuse me for the moment,' Benny murmured, and went to greet the newcomers.

The *maître d'* appeared at Luke's elbow as if by magic. 'Good evening, Mr Ransome, madame...'

'Evening, Joseph.'

'May I suggest a table just a discreet distance from the dance floor?'

'Sounds ideal.' Without fuss, a folded bill changed hands.

They were shown to a secluded candle-lit table for two. As soon as they were seated the wine waiter appeared, bearing a champagne bucket which held a bottle of Vintage Pol Roger. 'With Signor Diomedes' compliments. He asked me to say he will join you later for a chat...'

Sipping the excellent champagne, Jessica glanced around discreetly. Benny's was everything she might have expected and more.

The whole of one wall was made of glass, giving a wonderful view over a city decked in its bejewelled cloak of night.

Inside, the decor was understated yet sumptuous, with a mere handful of tables, widely spaced and scattered around a highly polished dance floor. All were occupied, and the atmosphere was redolent of wealth and privilege.

On a dais, an orchestra was playing Cole Porter and Jerome Kern classics, and a few couples were dancing. Mingling with the nostalgic music was a hum of talk and soft laughter and the popping of corks.

'What do you think of the place?' Luke asked.

'Though they aren't really alike, it reminds me a little of Peregrines.' For the first time she voluntarily brought up the past.

'Yes, I know what you mean. The atmosphere is similar. And so are the circumstances... Peregrines was a beginning.' Raising his glass, he added, 'Here's to a new one.'

Looking deeply into each other's eyes, they drank to a new beginning.

When an attentive waiter had taken their order, Luke stood up and held out his hand. 'Dance with me?'

Jessica went into his arms as if she belonged there.

Appropriately, the orchestra was playing 'Long Ago and Far Away'. While they danced they spoke very little, but there was a *closeness*, a rapport that was better than any words.

The meal itself proved to be delicious, and when they reached the coffee stage Benny pulled up a chair and joined them for a chat.

Addressing him politely as Signor Diomedes, Jessica was urged to call him Benny. He was a good raconteur, and without mentioning names kept them well entertained with anecdotes of some of his more eccentric clients.

He finally left them with instructions to Luke to 'have a word before you go' and they went back to the dance floor.

For Jessica, the whole evening had been full of pleasure, and when Luke whispered in her ear, 'I could dance all night if I wasn't getting impatient to hold you in my arms in a more intimate way,' it was the spark that sent her rocket of happiness sky high.

Softly, she assured him, 'I'm ready to leave when you are.'

A few seconds later the dance came to an end and, returning to their table to pick up her evening purse, she said, 'I'll go and powder my nose while you have a word with Benny.'

He nodded. 'I'll see you in the foyer in a few minutes.'

The powder-room was dove-grey and dawn-pink, elegantly feminine and stylish, with diffused lighting and soft background music.

Two well-dressed older women were having a chat, while a younger one renewed lipstick that already appeared perfect.

When Jessica had washed her hands she sat on a pink velvet chair to run a comb through her hair and touch up her face.

In the mirror she saw that a pretty, starry-eyed girl with

a faint flush of excitement on her cheeks had replaced the pale-faced, haggard woman of the past two days.

Happiness, it seemed, was a great beautifier.

When she emerged, there was no sign of Luke. She waited for perhaps a minute, then strolled back towards the dining-room entrance. The orchestra was playing 'No Other Love Have I' and she hummed the tune quietly to herself.

Just inside the archway she stopped dead. In one of the shallow alcoves, and partly shielded by a magnificent arrangement of fresh flowers, were Luke and a blonde woman. A woman that after a stunned second she recognized as Susan.

They were standing close together, talking. His head was bent towards her, her face uptilted to his. Her pale, red-tipped hand rested on his dark sleeve.

There was an intimacy about the body language and the low-toned conversation that insisted this was no casual chat, but something that mattered a great deal to them both.

After a few moments, his face alight, he smiled down at his companion, who stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the lips.

Released from the cruel spell that had kept her rooted to the spot, Jessica turned and fled back to the powder-room.

This time she had it to herself.

Feeling cold and slightly sick, her legs brittle, as if they might crumble under her at any moment, she sank down on the nearest chair.

All her previous happiness had gone, washed away by a flood of pain and bewilderment and anger. How could Luke lie to her like this?

All his talk, his declaration that he was no Casanova, that one woman was all he needed, was patently false. As false as his promise that he would try to make their marriage work.

It seemed all he really wanted was his daughter and a

convenient wife who would keep the family together and turn a blind eye to his mistress.

Which she had no intention of doing. It would be torture. But if she refused to go through with the wedding, how would she get Stacy back?

There must be a way. Kidnapping was against the law, but if it meant a long and bitter court battle the child would undoubtedly suffer, and she couldn't risk that. Stacy's happiness and security had to come first.

So what was she to do? There seemed to be only one hope. If she said nothing about seeing him with Susan and kept up the pretence of happiness, with his guard down, he might be prepared to tell her where Alice had taken Stacy.

But suppose he did tell her, what then?

She had once thought it would be easy to walk out of the penthouse, and so it would. But even with a return ticket in her handbag, she wouldn't have time to get back to England before Luke realized she'd gone. And as soon as he missed her he would, no doubt, arrange for Alice to move Stacy somewhere else.

It seemed she would have to go through with the wedding. Then when Luke had been lulled into a false sense of security, and she and Stacy were reunited, there would be a chance to take her and disappear once more. This time for good.

But could she carry it off? Could she, even for a short time, pretend to a happiness she didn't feel? She wasn't a good liar, but perhaps she would make a better actress.

No, there was no 'perhaps' about it. Somehow she had to turn in an Oscar-winning performance...

The door opened and a pair of younger women came in, talking and laughing, reminding her that time was getting on. By now Luke would be wondering where she'd got to, and the last thing she wanted was to rouse his suspicions.

Bracing herself, she made her way into the foyer.

He was standing, feet a little apart, looking quite at ease. There was no sign of the impatience she had expected.

She smiled at him. 'I hope I haven't kept you waiting.'

'Not at all,' he answered politely.

Slipping a hand through his arm, she asked lightly, 'Did you say goodnight to Benny for me?'

'I did. He remarked that you had the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen on a woman, and that I was a very lucky man. He said I was to bring you again soon.'

Though it was still a lovely evening, the walk back was vastly different to the walk there. On the way there she had been elated, on a high. Now she felt as though she were going to the scaffold, but she made a great effort to smile and talk brightly.

When they reached the penthouse Luke slipped the stole from her shoulders and, lightly holding her upper arms, bent to touch his lips to her nape.

It was all she could do not to pull away.

Putting his arms around her, he drew her back against him and, his hands cupping her breasts, moved his hips enticingly.

With so much on her mind, and the strain of trying to play a part, she had almost forgotten the reason for their return.

An idea that was now insupportable.

The picture of Susan and Luke standing so close together, kissing, seemed burnt into her brain. Unable to bear his touch, she said, 'I've developed a bit of a headache. Too much champagne, I think.'

There was a second's absolute stillness, then he asked evenly, 'Does that mean you no longer feel like making love?'

'I'm afraid so. Do you mind?'

'No. I've never cared to have a reluctant partner...whatever the cause.'

She was wondering uneasily about the rider when he added smoothly, 'If you want to go straight to bed, I'll bring you a couple of tablets and some hot milk.'

'Thanks, but that's really not necessary. I'll sleep it off. Which room am I in?'

'Ours, of course.' His eyes on her expressive face, he added, 'Don't worry, I've no intention of pressuring you just because we're sleeping in the same bed.'

'It's not that.' Forcing a smile, she added, 'I just thought it was unlucky for the bride and bridegroom to see each other on their wedding day before they arrived at the church.'

'I shouldn't imagine it applies any longer,' he said ironically. 'These days so many couples cohabit that it would be awkward, to say the least, to keep up a tradition like that. Most of them simply go to the church together.'

She didn't want to sleep beside Luke, but realizing that she couldn't protest any more without making him suspect something, she went to clean her teeth and prepare for bed.

When Jessica was ready, trying to keep her agitation under control, she went through to the bedroom. A single lamp was burning and the windows were open wide, letting in the soft night air.

To her relief there was no sign of Luke, but his jacket and trousers had been hung up, and she could hear the shower running in the other bathroom.

She wondered with bleak humour whether it was a cold one.

Whether it was or not, his absence was a boon. If she could pretend to be asleep when he came back, it would make things a whole lot easier.

Finding her new nightdresses, she chose the simplest, a daisy-strewn cotton shortie that buttoned all the way down the front.

Changing into it quickly, she put her clothes over a chair.

Then she climbed into the king-sized bed and switched off the lamp.

Even with the lamp off, the room was quite light. No doubt, only a major power cut could plunge the sky above New York into darkness.

Taking care to leave plenty of space, desperate not to touch him, she pulled up the lightweight duvet and closed her eyes.

She was barely settled when she heard the door open and then close again quietly. Her eyes shut tight, she listened to the whisper of Luke's footfalls as he crossed to the bed.

Some sixth sense told her that he was standing looking down at her, and she knew a momentary panic.

After what seemed an age, he moved away. A second or two later she felt the mattress dip slightly as he slid in beside her.

As though she could see him, she was aware that he lay on his back, his hands clasped beneath his head, staring up at the ceiling.

When, without warning, he turned on his side and, reaching over, gathered her to him, she gave a startled gasp.

'You may not feel like making love,' he said sardonically, 'but as we're getting married tomorrow morning, I see no reason to keep a no man's land between us...'

He was naked, and through the thin material of her night-dress she could feel the warmth of his body.

'And before you bother with any more play-acting, I know you were only pretending to be asleep.'

'How did you know?'

'You were far too tense and your breathing was all wrong. *Why* were you pretending? And don't give me the obvious reason. I've already said I had no intention of pressuring you...'

In spite of everything, his nearness was having an over-

whelming effect on her and, angry at her own weakness, she made an attempt to pull away.

His grip merely tightened.

'I wish you'd let me go,' she said in a stifled voice.

'Don't you fancy sleeping in my arms?' The mockery was blatant.

Losing her temper, she snapped, 'No. I don't.'

'I wonder why not. The heat, perhaps? Tell you what, why don't you take off your nightdress?'

Jessica had barely time to appreciate that he was *furious* when with a sudden movement she was unprepared for, he sat up. Leaning over her, he gripped the bodice with both hands and gave a savage jerk that ripped all the buttons from the buttonholes.

Ignoring her startled cry, he freed her arms and, pulling the ruined garment from beneath her, tossed it aside.

She braced herself, half expecting to feel his weight come crushing down on her, but, studying her frightened face, he told her curtly, 'There's no need to look so scared. I'm not planning to ravish you.'

Stretching out on his back again, he once more drew her to him.

As soon as she could find her breath, she asked, 'Then what made you tear my nightdress?'

'Just at that instant I needed to let off steam.'

Normally, Luke was one of the most self-controlled people she had ever met, and she shivered.

Feeling that shiver, he said, 'There's no need for concern. It was myself more than you that I was angry with. For the second time I'd made the mistake of believing that our relationship was really going somewhere... I was even fool enough to think you must have decided to trust me.'

With some desperate hope of retrieving the situation, she stammered, 'I—I don't know what you mean.'

'You know perfectly well what I mean.'

When she half shook her head, he said, 'It's no use, Jess. I know this sudden volte-face was brought about by seeing Susan and me together. I caught a glimpse of you disappearing. In the circumstances I hoped you might mention what you'd seen...'

'If you knew I'd seen you and Susan together, why didn't you say something?'

'When it became obvious that you weren't going to mention it, I decided to wait and see just how good an actress you were.'

'Not very good, apparently,' she said bitterly.

'Tell me something, Jess, instead of presuming the worst, as you apparently did, why didn't you ask for an explanation?'

'I thought you'd just lie to me again.'

'I've *never* lied to you.'

She clenched her teeth, wanting to believe him, unable to believe him.

'So what did you intend to do?' he pursued softly. 'Go through with the wedding?'

'There didn't seem to be much option.'

'And then what?'

When she stayed silent, he hazarded, 'Take Stacy and run at the first opportunity?'

'Can you blame me?' she cried. 'You talked about wanting a marriage that would last, about one woman being enough, but you didn't mean a word of it.'

'I meant every word.'

'Except when it comes to Susan. You're still seeing her.'

'Yes. Though as I've told you more than once, she and I are just good friends.'

'That's a laugh!' Jessica cried. 'I saw you kissing her.'

'No, you saw *her* kissing *me*. Susan's always been demonstrative and, in case it's escaped your notice, old friends do sometimes kiss each other.'

'And I suppose old friends sometimes end up late at night, semi-naked in each other's arms?'

Feeling him tense, she wished the last remark unsaid, but after a moment he answered, 'Sometimes. Things aren't always what they seem, Jess.'

'Things looked pretty conclusive to me.'

'If only you'd trusted me, instead of jumping to conclusions the way you did...'

'Are you still trying to say that it was all quite innocent?'

'Yes,' he said firmly.

'If it was, my stepmother must have been very disappointed.'

'You've always been prejudiced as far as Susan was concerned...'

She couldn't deny it.

'Have you never thought that you could have been mistaken about her? That there might have been a *reason* for what you saw as her flightiness, her neglect of your father? Have you never considered the fact that William loved her and thought well of her?'

When Jessica failed to answer, he said grimly, 'I see you haven't. Susan came to my room that night not to make love but to pour out her heart to me. For reasons I won't go into, because they're not really mine to give, she needed a shoulder to cry on...'

'Then why didn't you tell me that much at least?'

'If I remember rightly, you wouldn't listen...'

With a feeling of being in the wrong, Jessica silently admitted that was the truth.

'Any more than you'll listen now.'

'I am listening.'

'Very well. Though Susan and I have seen each other from time to time, tonight's meeting was a chance one. I had no idea she was at Benny's until I bumped into her on my way back to the foyer.'

'You seemed to have a lot of things to say to each other.'
'Friends sometimes do.'

'You say you've seen her from time to time. Will you still be seeing her after we...after tomorrow?' If only he'd say no and mean it.

'Yes,' he answered flatly, 'as a friend.'

Somehow his stance was more convincing than if he'd made false promises, and she felt ashamed.

Apparently taking her silence for angry resentment, he said wearily, 'Nothing has changed since you asked me, "Wouldn't a warm bath be nicer?" Nothing has changed since you told me you were happy. Yet for no good reason, *everything* has changed. You no longer want to make love with me, you no longer want to share my bed, and it seems that as far as our marriage goes we're back to square one.'

Raggedly, he added, 'How can I live continually wondering whether I'm going to get home and find my wife and daughter gone?'

'Luke, I'm sorry if—'

Sounding like a man in torment, he went on, 'You've got to believe that Susan is—and never has been anything but—a friend. You've got to *trust* me, Jess, otherwise there's not a cat in hell's chance of our marriage succeeding and we may as well call the whole thing off.'

CHAPTER TEN

TURNING a little in Luke's arms to look up at his face, Jessica whispered, 'Call the whole thing off?'

'Isn't that what you'd prefer? If the answer's yes, you can sleep in one of the guest rooms tonight and fly home as soon as it's convenient.'

'What about Stacy?'

'I love my daughter and I want her. But I want her to grow up in a loving and stable environment. If you're not willing to marry me and stay with me, not willing to trust me, say so now. I can't chance hurting Stacy and ruining all our lives.'

'Suppose I say I'm not?'

'You can have Stacy back. I'll make sure you have no more financial worries, and bow out of both your lives. She's never had a father, but there's an old saying that what you've never had you never miss...'

He sounded bitter, defeated, and her heart ached for him.

'And if I say I *am* willing?'

'I'll do everything in my power to make you happy. It's your choice, but you've got to be sure. This time there's no turning back, so think about it. Think what you really want.'

But she didn't need to think about it. She already knew what she wanted.

To have Stacy back and no financial worries should have filled her with joy, yet without Luke the future suddenly loomed bleak and barren and joyless. She wanted him there, by her side. Wanted the kind of family future he'd once painted.

But he'd laid it on the line. It meant believing him, trusting him. Could she really do that?

Why not? He was almost fiercely honest, not the kind of man who would lie. Perhaps, subconsciously, she'd always known that. Only the weak, the cowardly and ineffectual needed to lie. Luke was none of those things.

She'd been wrong about the bank. She might have been wrong about his relationship with her stepmother.

Suddenly, with a deep and passionate conviction, she felt sure she had, and her refusal to listen had caused both Luke and herself to suffer.

It had been her own blind jealousy that had torn them apart, wasted years of their lives, thrown away the love they might have shared.

But it wasn't too late. Because of Stacy she had another chance. And though Luke no longer loved her, she still loved him.

That would have to be enough for the time being. After a while, as he had suggested, they might even get to *like* each other again.

Her heart lifting, she murmured, 'Luke...'

For a moment he lay quite still, as if turned to stone, then he asked evenly, 'Have you decided what you want?'

'Yes.' It was impossible to tell him all that was in her heart, so she said merely, 'I want *you*. I want to marry you and stay with you. I was wrong not to trust you.'

With a kind of desperate hope he asked, 'You really mean that?'

'Yes, I mean it.' Jessica put up a hand and touched his cheek. It felt damp, but it was almost impossible to believe that a man like Luke would be moved to tears. He must want his daughter very much.

To assuage a little of her guilt she added, 'I'll even try to make friends with Susan if that's what you want.'

'I feel sure it's what your father would have wanted.'

For a little while they stayed still and silent, each apparently busy with their separate thoughts. Then, drawing a deep breath, she began delicately, 'I was just wondering... That shower you have before coming to bed... was it a cold one?'

She heard his soft chuckle before he took her hand and moved it down. 'Judge for yourself.'

Jessica surfaced to find the room filled with daylight and warm air. Faintly, she could hear the background hum of the city. Turning drowsily to snuggle up to Luke, she discovered that his side of the bed was empty.

A glance at her watch showed it was almost ten o'clock. But as they hadn't gone to sleep until dawn was fingering the sky that wasn't surprising, she thought, blushing a little at the memory of Luke's ardent and inventive love-making.

After so many desolate years apart, their hunger for each other had been insatiable, and they might not have slept at all if Luke hadn't said whimsically that with their wedding night coming up, they had better get *some* rest...

A tap at the door broke into her thoughts. Wondering why Luke was bothering to knock, she called, 'Come in.'

The door opened and an elderly woman with soft, greying hair and a gentle face came in, carrying a tray. 'Good morning.' Her smile was wide and friendly. 'I'm Rosemary Carter. Mr Luke asked me to bring toast and coffee about ten.'

Jessica sat up and, her cheeks growing warm again, said, 'Thank you. I hope it's not too much of a nuisance.'

'Not at all...' Setting the tray down carefully, she added, 'He said to tell you he's arranged for a car to pick you up just before eleven.'

'Then he's not still here?'

'No, he left about half an hour ago. By the way, if you

need any help to get dressed, just call.' Without fuss, Rosemary departed.

On the tray was a posy of velvety-blue sweet violets—how had Luke managed to get violets at this time of the year and in New York? There was also a note.

Opening it, she read, 'I've been in touch with Stamford Franklin and told him that the deal will go ahead but he'll need another analyst. See you in church. Luke.'

It would have been nice if he'd put 'love', she thought wistfully. But, no doubt, it was better to be honest. She was satisfied he *wanted* her in his life, and perhaps that was as much as she could ask.

Buttering a slice of toast, she wondered briefly what a staid and correct man like Mr Franklin would make of such a hasty marriage. He'd probably think she'd lost her mind.

When she'd finished her toast and coffee, she hurriedly cleaned her teeth, showered, made up lightly and brushed her hair into a shining curtain.

Then with Rosemary Carter's help she put on her dress and the simple coronet that held her short veil in place. By the time the doorbell rang at ten minutes to eleven she was ready and waiting.

The housekeeper went to answer it, letting in a tall, fair-haired man in his middle forties, dressed in a smart charcoal-grey suit and wearing a cream carnation in his button-hole.

'Miss Fenton, I'm Clark Lemster, an old friend of Luke's.' His handshake was firm, his smile pleasant.

'Allow me to say that you look absolutely beautiful. Luke's a very lucky man.'

'Thank you.'

'All ready?'

Clutching her posy of violets, suddenly nervous, she answered, 'Yes, I'm ready.'

As though sensing her nervousness, he offered her his

arm, saying cheerfully, 'Then let's get this show on the road.'

A silver-grey wedding car decked in white ribbons was waiting. When they were installed and moving along 5th Avenue, he remarked, 'By the way, I don't know whether Luke's told you, but Jeremy, my younger brother, is acting as best man, and with your permission I'll be giving you away.'

St Paul's church, incongruously sandwiched between skyscrapers, was built of reddish-brown stone. Its tall steeple, and arched leaded windows gave it an age-old solemnity that stood piously aloof from the bustle surrounding it.

Inside it was cool and dim, apart from where sunlight shining through the stained-glass windows laid jewel-bright lozenges of colour along the backs of the polished pews. There were flowers everywhere, and the sound of an organ being played softly.

A kindly faced priest met them at the door. Having greeted them, he led them up the aisle to where Luke and a fair-haired man, both looking handsome in grey suits and carnations, were waiting by the chancel steps.

The church appeared to be empty apart from a woman wearing an elegant blue hat, who sat alone in the front pew. As they drew level, she turned her head to look at them.

The woman was Susan.

Jessica's step faltered.

There was an electric tension as Luke, his eyes fixed on her face, waited for her reaction.

This, then, was the moment of truth.

Lifting her chin, she moved towards him and gave him a radiant smile.

His answering smile said it all.

* * *

Vows made, and rings exchanged, the simple ceremony was over. They were declared man and wife and, having received permission, Luke kissed his bride.

Conducted by the priest, the small party moved through to the vestry.

'Luke asked me to be your witness,' Susan said quietly. 'I hope you don't mind too much?'

Taking a deep breath, Jessica said, 'No, I'm very happy about it.' She even managed a smile.

When the marriage record was duly signed, Luke thanked Father Lansbury and asked, 'Would you care to lunch with us? We have a small reception booked at the Belmotte-Ruisse.'

'I'd be delighted,' the priest told him, 'but unfortunately I have some pressing church matters to attend to.'

Opening her bag, Susan produced a small camera and asked, 'Have you any objections to me taking a few photographs before we go?'

'None at all,' he assured her benevolently.

The photographs having been duly taken, the wedding party made their way outside to where the wedding-car, sun ricocheting from its polished bonnet, was waiting.

Luke helped Jessica in and took his place beside her. To the others he said, 'I'll send the car back for you.'

'I think I'd prefer to walk,' Susan decided. 'It's only a few blocks, and it's not too hot today.'

As both the men with her feigned horror, she added, 'It'll do you idle pair good to walk.' Addressing Clark, she said, 'You're getting quite a paunch.'

With a rueful grin, he complained, 'It takes a wife to cut a man down to size,' adding judicially, 'Considering the heels my dearly beloved is wearing, the walk may take us some time, so don't drink all the champagne before we get there.'

'We won't,' Luke promised.

As they pulled away from the church and joined the traffic stream, still unsure if she'd heard aright, Jessica began weakly, 'Are Susan and Clark...?'

'Married? Yes. They've been husband and wife for a year now. I was their best man.'

About to ask why he hadn't told her, she stopped herself. It was obvious why. He'd wanted her to trust him without having to tell her.

'As a matter of fact, it was their wedding anniversary yesterday. They were dining at Benny's to celebrate.'

'So when I saw you talking you were making arrangements about today?'

'Rather confirming arrangements that had been in place for almost a week. Susan asked how things were going between us two. She thought I might be having problems. I assured her that everything was fine. That's when she kissed me.'

'She doesn't know...?'

'What lengths I had to go to? No. She knew about Stacy, and that I wanted her, and she knew I'd fixed it so you would be coming over for the seminar. She just wasn't sure I could get you to listen, or talk you into marrying me so quickly.'

As he finished speaking the car drew up in front of the Belmonte-Ruisse. Luke got out and gave Jessica his hand.

The manager was at the door to welcome them and offer his congratulations and best wishes. Asked to keep things quiet so the media wouldn't get to hear of the wedding, he had been hovering discreetly, waiting for their arrival.

As they were led across the foyer and shown to the small private room reserved for them, residents and staff alike glanced their way and smiled. Everyone, it seemed, was happy to catch sight of a bride.

A buffet was set, with a beautifully decorated wedding

cake as a centrepiece, and waiters were poised ready to serve both the food and the wine.

The first cork popped, and at Luke's invitation the manager shared a glass of champagne with the newly-weds while they awaited their guests.

In spite of Clark's less than optimistic forecast, the contingent on foot arrived first, and they exchanged hugs and kisses and handshakes.

Annie and the Carters came next, all dressed to the nines. George, seated in the latest type of electric wheelchair—which Jessica learnt later had been a gift from Luke—was a merry-looking man with bright blue eyes and a small, neatly trimmed beard.

'I'm sure you'll be very happy,' George said, as Jessica stooped to let him kiss her cheek. 'Luke's one of the finest men I've ever known.'

They were followed moments later by Benny, who announced that although he was unable to stay long there was no way he would miss their reception. He shook hands with Luke and kissed the bride, before accepting a glass of champagne.

'When are you going away?' he asked Luke. 'I mean on honeymoon... You are having a honeymoon?'

'We have a flight booked for later,' Luke answered. He glanced at Jessica. 'Though my wife knows nothing about it yet, and whether we actually take it is up to her.'

'Ah, I see.' Benny tapped the side of his large nose. 'A secret. So as well as being a good businessman, you're a romantic at heart...'

The gathering, albeit a small one and diverse, was lively, with a sense of occasion. When they'd done justice to the buffet, the cake was cut, while Susan took a few more pictures. Then the best man made a short and witty speech, and everyone drank a toast to the newly-weds.

Though Jessica talked and laughed with the rest, her

wedding day had taken on an unreal quality. She felt that at any moment she might waken to find she was back in the Hampstead flat, and the whole thing had been just a dream.

Over the last three days—*only three days*—her emotions had been in a turmoil. Events had moved so quickly, crowding in, piling one on top of the other, until her brain felt out of sync. Above all, she longed for a period of calm, time to catch up, to adjust.

When Benny had made his farewells, Luke left her side to accompany him to the door, where they stood having a few last words.

Feeling the need for a moment of quiet, Jessica headed for the adjoining ladies room and sank onto a chair. She had been there only a short while when the door opened and Susan came in.

‘I hope you don’t mind me following you?’ she asked a shade diffidently. ‘I just wanted to tell you I was sorry to have kept it from you, but I’d promised faithfully not to say anything. It was only when it was too late that I realized you *should* have known...’

Seeing Jessica’s blank look, she exclaimed, ‘Surely Luke told you?’

‘Told me what?’

‘Why I went to his room that night.’

‘He just said you needed to talk.’

‘It was a little more than that. I needed to be able to pour out all my worries and fears to someone who would understand...’

Sitting down alongside Jessica, she went on, ‘I know you’ve always thought the worst, and from your point of view it must have looked pretty damning. At that time I was...’ She hesitated, then went on firmly, ‘I was unhappy and in need of comfort. I frankly admit that though I loved your father dearly, if Luke had shown any interest in me

as a woman I might have been sorely tempted. But he didn't. He never had. I'd always found him incredibly sexy, but he didn't feel the same way about me. Apart from the fact that I'm ten years older than he is, I guess I'm just not his type.'

'But if you and Dad loved each other, why...?' Embarrassed, Jessica broke off.

'Was I unhappy?' Susan finished for her. 'I've always needed to be...physically close to someone... After my first husband died I was terribly lonely. You may not believe this, but though I like to go out and have a good time, perhaps because of my upbringing, I've never indulged in casual sex or been one for affairs. So it was wonderful when I met William and we fell in love. For the first few months we were so very happy. Then he seemed to lose all his energy. He began to feel permanently tired and listless. After a series of tests, the hospital discovered he was suffering from a very rare and incurable disease of the blood. Amongst the minor side effects were lassitude, breathlessness, and impotence, amongst the major a deleterious effect on the heart which eventually leads to heart failure.'

'I wanted him to stop going to the bank. It was a physical strain as well as a growing burden of worry, but he said that something was badly wrong and he had to get to the bottom of it or he'd end up bankrupt. That's when I begged Luke to help. He has one of the best brains I know. I thought if he could sort things out it would at least lift some of the pressure. When he promised to come, I tried again to get William to stay at home, but he was determined to live as if nothing was wrong, for whatever time he had left.'

'He asked how long that might be, but the doctors seemed unable to agree. The estimates varied from a few months to a few years. Because of the uncertainty, he didn't want you to know, and he made me promise that I wouldn't tell you either about his state of health or how bad his financial problems were.'

'He loved you more than anything or anybody in the whole wide world, and he wanted to spare you as much pain and anxiety as possible...'

Jessica was listening silently, tears coursing down her cheeks unnoticed.

'He also wanted me to promise that I would go out and about without him when he didn't feel up to going. He said he wanted "the two women he loved most"—his words, not mine—to live as normal a life as possible. But though I tried to do as he wanted, over the weeks and months I began to feel the strain. The night he took ill in the theatre, though he made light of it and refused to let me call a doctor, I had a premonition that it was the end. I just had to talk to someone...'

'Later when we tried to tell you how things were you wouldn't listen. Luke suggested that we leave it until the first shock of William's death was over, then talk to you. Unfortunately you walked out first...'

There was a long silence. Reaching for a tissue to wipe away the tears, Jessica said, 'Thank you for telling me now. I just wish I'd waited and listened. It would have saved me making a lot of bad mistakes. But at least it's put things in perspective.'

Sighing, she added, 'Isn't it strange to think that you live your life forwards but sometimes only make sense of it in retrospect?'

Determinedly shrugging off the remembered sadness, Susan said, 'I'm so glad that things have finally worked out for you.'

'They have up to a point.'

'Up to a point? I thought it was a fairy-tale ending... Or should I say beginning?'

'It would be if Luke loved me.'

'Of course he loves you.'

Jessica shook her head. 'He might have done once, but

I killed any love he had for me. He only wants me because of Stacy...'.

Susan looked as if she was about to argue, then changed her mind. 'Well, I guess I'd better go back. Clark will be wondering where I've got to.'

Both women rose to their feet. Impulsively, Jessica said, 'I hope you're happy.'

'Very.' Susan's face glowed. 'Clark's one of the nicest men you could wish to meet.'

In a sudden rush of confidence she added, 'Though we've both left it a bit late, we'd like to have children. To tell you the truth, I'm keeping my fingers crossed at the moment...'

Judging by the buzz of talk and laughter, things were still going with a swing, Jessica thought as they re-entered the room.

Susan went to join her husband, who glanced up at her approach and smiled. There was no mistaking the look of love on his face.

Jessica felt a dull ache of longing. If only Luke would look at her like that.

Luke's heavy-lashed grey eyes studied Jessica's face, and he queried, 'Susan been talking to you?'

'Yes. She's told me everything. I'm sorry.'

He squeezed her hand, then said briskly, 'It's time we were moving. The others still seem to be enjoying themselves, so I suggest we just slip quietly away.'

When the lift reached the penthouse, and the doors slid open, Luke picked Jessica up in his arms. Recalling how he'd carried her over the threshold the night they had become lovers for the first time, she gave a little shiver of excitement.

Moving swiftly, with a kind of urgency, he carried her into the bedroom and, setting her on her feet, said, 'Let me

give you a hand.' With deft fingers he began to undo the small covered buttons down the back of her dress.

Her heart picking up speed, she allowed him to help her off with her things and slip the satin shoes from her feet.

When Jessica was standing in her bra and briefs, Luke left her to strip off his own clothes.

Her throat went dry in anticipation, but instead of removing his silk shorts he began to dress again, pulling on smart-casual trousers and a fawn shirt.

Disappointment clogging her throat, she hung up her wedding finery and put on a silky dress and sandals.

If he didn't intend to make love to her, why had he hurried her through to the bedroom? she wondered as she put the posy of violets in water.

But perhaps time was short. He'd told Benny they had a flight booked...

'You mentioned something about having a flight booked, and it being up to me...' she began carefully.

'Yes, it's time you knew. We have seats on an early evening flight to San Francisco. I thought we could have a couple of days there and then go on to Hawaii. Perhaps spend a week in all. When we're settled, we can have a longer holiday wherever you fancy. Take Stacy with us.'

'That sounds wonderful—'

The doorbell rang, cutting through her words.

'Perhaps you'll go?' Luke asked casually.

She went to the door and opened it.

Standing there, beaming proudly at her, were Stacy and Alice. Dropping to her knees, Jessica hugged the small figure to her.

After returning the hug, Stacy wriggled free and asked, 'Mummy, why are you crying?'

'I'm not crying, darling, not really. I'm just so pleased to see you.'

'Alice said you would be. Do you know we've been on a big aeroplane? It was lots of fun. We had orange juice

and little trays with food on and the man who flewed it showed us the...what did he show us, Alice...?’

‘The cockpit.’

‘The cockpit. He let me sit on his knee and he said I could—’

‘Before you get to hear the whole story,’ Alice broke in hastily, ‘all the luggage is downstairs in the lobby. One of the security men is keeping an eye on it, and he’s going to bring it up when the other man gets back. By the way, Stacy’s passport is in the zipped pocket of her case. Now, I really need to go.’

‘Where are you going?’ Stacy asked.

‘To where I live. Do you remember I told you I had an apartment in New York?’

‘Can I see your ’partment?’

‘Of course you can, pet, but some other time.’

To Jessica, she said, ‘Stacy’s had a good long sleep on the plane, so she should easily last until bedtime.’

Luke, who had been standing in the background, asked, ‘You’ll be coming back later?’

‘If you want me.’

His grey eyes met Jessica’s. They held a silent question.

Jessica hesitated, torn. She didn’t like the thought of leaving Stacy again so soon, but neither did she want to disappoint Luke.

‘Yes, please, Alice,’ she answered. ‘And thank you.’

Her gaze moving from Jessica’s dainty wedding ring to Luke’s broader band, Alice asked practically, ‘What time, and how long for?’

‘About five-thirty,’ Luke answered, ‘and for at least a week, if that’s OK?’

‘Fine by me. I’ll leave my case. Going far?’

‘San Francisco and then on to Hawaii.’

‘Sounds good.’ To Stacy, she said, ‘See you later, alligator.’

‘In a while, cwocodile,’ Stacy answered happily.

When Alice had gone, Jessica took her daughter's hand and said, 'Darling, do you know who this is?'

Stacy regarded Luke solemnly, then shook her head.

Going down on his haunches so their eyes were almost on a level, Luke told her quietly, 'I'm your daddy.'

'Emily's got a daddy,' Stacy observed. 'His name's Brian. What's your name?'

'My name's Luke.'

Studying him, Stacy added thoughtfully, 'But Emily's daddy's not a new one. He's always been her daddy.'

'I'm not exactly a new one either. I've always been *your* daddy, but I haven't been able to live with you and Mummy.'

'Will you live with us now?'

'I rather thought you might both like to live in New York with me.'

'And Alice?'

'I'm sure Alice would come and live with us, if Mummy wants her to.'

'Can she, Mummy? Can she?'

Jessica smiled. 'Of course.'

Standing up, Luke offered his hand. 'If you like, I'll show you where you and Alice will be sleeping.'

Stacy took his hand and trotted off happily.

Jessica sent up a silent prayer of thanks. She had her daughter back, and Stacy seemed to have accepted Luke without question. The first, and most difficult hurdle was over.

As she followed more slowly, she could hear Stacy's piping treble asking, 'Is where you live called a house?'

And Luke's much deeper voice answering, 'It's called a penthouse, because it's right at the very top of the building.'

'Oh...' Stacy sounded disappointed.

'But I've got a house as well.'

'Has it got a garden?'

'Yes, it's got a garden. There's a garden here, too. Look, just outside your window.'

'Mummy said when we had a house with a garden we could have a puppy. Can we?'

'I'm sure we can. When Mummy and I come back from our honeymoon we'll go and choose one.'

'What's a honeymoon?'

'It's a kind of holiday. The sort that mummies and daddies take together.'

But Stacy had lost interest in honeymoons. 'When we get a puppy I'm going to call her Henry.'

'A very nice name,' Luke said approvingly. 'I once had a teddy bear called Henry.'

'I had to leave my big teddy bear at home, and my cookery set,' Stacy mourned. "'Cos we had too much to carry.'

'Well, we'll soon have all your things brought over. In the meantime, what about going along to a toy store I know and choosing something new to play with?'

At Stacy's whoop of joy, he added, 'Shall we ask Mummy if she'd like to come with us?'

'Would you, Mummy?'

About to say yes, Jessica paused. It was only fair that Luke should have time on his own to get to know his daughter.

'I don't think so, darling. I need to pack. You and Daddy go, then you can surprise me.'

To Luke, she said lightly, 'I thought I might begin my wifely duties by packing some things for you.'

He gave her a glinting look. 'Second best, but it'll do for the moment.'

Jessica began to pack, finding it strange to be selecting clothes for a man. She had just finished when Luke and Stacy arrived back, conversing amiably and loaded with things they'd bought.

Jessica was about to say something about not spoiling

their daughter, until a glance at Luke's face told her he was enjoying himself even more than Stacy.

Guiltily she remembered that he had several years of pleasure to catch up on. And no doubt Alice, with her down-to-earth policies, would be a steady influence on the pair of them.

By the time all the boxes and parcels had been opened and exclaimed over, Alice was back, providing a new audience while Jessica and Luke got ready to depart.

Jessica had dreaded having to explain to her daughter that she was leaving her again, but as soon as she broached the subject Stacy said cheerfully, 'I know. Daddy has already told me. It's called a nunnymoon, a thing that mummies and daddies go on together. I'm going to stay here and play with Alice,' she added matter-of-factly.

When Jessica had hugged and kissed her daughter and been hugged and kissed in return, she asked, 'Have you got a hug for Daddy?'

When Luke crouched down, she threw her arms around him and hugged him with great enthusiasm.

'You sure give good hugs,' he told her, his voice a little husky.

She giggled, and gave him another one, saying proudly, 'That's a bear hug.'

'Wow!'

Late that night as they got into bed at their hotel in Union Square, San Francisco, his eyes on his wife's heart-shaped face, Luke asked quietly, 'Worried about leaving Stacy again so soon?'

'No, not really.'

'Regretting marrying me?'

'No.'

'Well, you don't look too happy that we're about to enjoy our wedding night.'

Oh, yes, she'd enjoy it, Jessica thought sadly. Luke was

too good a lover to allow her to do otherwise. But it wasn't just sex she wanted, it was *love*.

When she said nothing he continued to probe. 'Afraid things won't work out?'

Suddenly close to tears, looking anywhere but at him, she said, 'No, I'm sure they will. I can see you love Stacy, and I'm sure she'll get to love you.'

'So what's wrong? Is it that *you* don't love me?'

'No, it isn't that...' She hesitated, then admitted, 'I do love you. I couldn't stop loving you, even when I thought I hated you...'

'It's been the same for me,' he told her quietly.

Hardly able to believe she'd heard right, she turned her head and saw the look on his face she'd been longing to see.

'Stacy wasn't the only reason I wanted you back. If you hadn't had my child I would still have wanted you. Since the minute I laid eyes on you you've been a part of me, the part that makes me whole and complete...'

The tears overflowed, but this time they were tears of joy, and Luke kissed them away with an overwhelming tenderness.

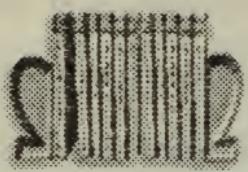
Their love-making was simple and joyful, a lovely mutual easement and pleasure. As well as passion there was an acknowledged love that lifted their union to a new height.

Afterwards, lying in his arms, Jessica said, 'I never knew I could feel this happy.'

'Nor me.' Luke kissed the top of her head. 'Until a few days ago I was a man who had everything but what I wanted.'

'A second chance of happiness comes so rarely. We'll just have to spend the next fifty years or so making the most of it.'

She sighed. 'What a lovely thought.'



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TV star Rico Mandretti has wowed Sydney, but he harbors another passion. He knows Renée Selensky despises him, and her history makes her as potent as poison. Then fate delivers Rico an unbeatable hand: he wins a game of cards—and Renée into the bargain!

#2362 THE SALVATORE MARRIAGE Michelle Reid

When tragedy reunites Shannon Gilbraith with Luca Salvatore, he presses Shannon to marry him. But she knows it's not because of love. For the sake of her tiny orphaned niece she knows she will submit—but what does the future hold...?

#2363 THE SPANIARD'S PASSION Jane Porter

Sophie is penniless now that her late husband has left her with a pile of gambling debts. She had agreed to that loveless marriage only to escape her overwhelming attraction for South American millionaire Alonso Galván. The only way to put the past behind her is to travel to South America....

#2364 THE YULETIDE ENGAGEMENT Carole Mortimer

Pride stops Ellie Fairfax from asking Patrick McGrath to accompany her to her boss's Christmas party. Luckily for her, Patrick has invited himself! He's convinced Ellie might be pining for her devious ex-boyfriend. How can she show Patrick that he's top of her Christmas wish list?

#2365 THE CHRISTMAS BABY'S GIFT Kate Walker

They married for convenience because they wanted a baby. But a year later Peta still hasn't become pregnant. Then a baby girl is left on their doorstep just before Christmas. Will this child be the gift that gives Peta and Liam the chance to discover their love?

#2366 THE DOCTOR'S RUNAWAY BRIDE Sarah Morgan

Just before her wedding, nurse Tia Franklin realizes she can't marry Dr. Luca Zattoni. She's made a discovery about him that has shattered her dreams. So she leaves Venice—and the man she loves. But Luca follows her. He fully intends to claim his bride—and their unborn child....

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The reluctant bride!

Jessica is certain that not only has Luke Ransome cheated her father in business, he's also having an affair with her stepmother! So when Jessica realizes she's pregnant with Luke's child, she's forced to run away....

Determined to make Jessica face the truth, Luke searches until he finds her. But the secret she's been keeping from him means the rules have changed. Now it's not the truth Luke's interested in—it's a wedding!



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ISBN 0-373-18813-7

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